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BLUNDERING BASIL THE HERMIT BOY TRAPPER



OR, The Bad Man from Wapsipinnicon.

BY OLL COOMES,
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BATTLER," "LITTLE BUCKSKIN," "WHIP-
KING JOE," "VAGABOND JOE," "SIL-
VER STAR," "SURE-SHOT SETH,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

BLUNDERING BASIL.

A CANOE, in which reclined the stout, sturdy figure of a youth clad in hunter's garb, was drifting at the will of the sluggish current down the Des Moines River.

It was an October day. There was that ripe, delicious fragrance in the balmy air, found nowhere in all the land save upon the wild prairie.

FOR A MOMENT THE BOY TRAPPER WAS ALL ALERTNESS—FLASHING HIS GLANCES ALONG THE SHORE FOR A GLIMPSE OF HIS WOULD-BE ASSASSIN.

ries and in the boundless woods of the great West. In the mellow, dreamy voices of nature there was a plaintive symphony as sweetly attuned by their commingling as the harps we hear in Dreamland.

Over all—like a mystic veil softening the outlines of the landscape—hung a blue haze—the haze of Indian summer. But all this romantic splendor of incense, sight and sound, did not seem to stir a single emotion in the breast of the young borderman afloat on the river. He gazed down into the water with passive indifference. The twittering of bright-eyed birds that still lingered about their summer homes; the saucy barking of squirrels in the trees along the shore; the whirr and flap of water-fowls' wings above and around him, received not a passing notice. He seemed blind and deaf to all things and all sounds. When he shifted his position, as he did now and then, his movements were as sluggish as the river's current upon which he was drifting.

But, why was he so lifeless? so indifferent? He could not have been sick, for his big, round and ruddy face was the very picture of robust health; nor could he have been wounded, for there was no evidence of physical pain upon his immobile features. So, to a casual observer, it must have seemed that he was indifferent to all his surroundings, and drifting, he knew not where, and, perhaps, cared less; or else he was wrapt in a profound reverie from which no ordinary noise could arouse him. And thus he floated, regardless of time or tide, until—

The crash of a rifle from the shore, and a bullet whistling over the head of the silent boatman, changed that reverie into alertness.

Quick as a flash the youth dropped on his knee, his rifle in hand, his coonskin cap pushed back from his brow, his eyes wide-open as a buck's, sending searching glances along the shore, his face flushed, his broad breast heaving and every chord and muscle of his strong frame swelling with the strength of the Hercules that he was.

The transformation was complete. The boy who had lain so drowsily in the boat now seemed the very picture of defiance. He could not have been over eighteen or nineteen years of age. He was of medium height, but broad-shouldered, deep-chested, with arms and neck as strong and muscular as those of a Roman gladiator.

And thus appeared Blundering Basil, the Hermit Boy Trapper.

The *sobriquet* may seem paradoxical, but by this name only was he known to the settlers of Hickory Point. Three years previous to the opening of our story he had drifted into the Point alone, half-naked and half-starved. He had been leading a vagabond life among the frontier settlements so long that he had but a vague recollection of where he first started. His parents both dying when he was young, he soon became a homeless, friendless waif. But, when he arrived at Hickory Point, the good settlers took him in and gave him food and raiment.

He proved, however, to be a very eccentric fellow. He was possessed of so many peculiar traits that no one could determine upon what course of treatment and advice was best for him. He was generally good-natured, full of boyish pranks, bright and quick-witted; but, there were times when he sulked, was cross and sullen, his wits becoming dull and torpid; and at such times he was a very disagreeable person.

Another failing with Basil was his aversion to physical labor unless attended with some danger or sport. He would lie down by an ax or hoe and sleep like a bear in midwinter; but, give him a pair of wild steers, or a vicious colt to break, or a rifle with which to hunt, and he was all life and animation. He would never give up until he had finished his work, and, in conquering the untrained animals, he always won by dint of patience, perseverance and pluck.

And as a hunter, there was not a man in Hickory Point who could beat Basil in killing deer. Big and clumsy as he seemed, he was phenomenally lucky as a hunter, and when asked for the secret of his success, his answer always was: "I blunder onto it."

In fact, everything he did was by "blundering onto it," by his own admission, and so in time he became known as Blundering Basil.

So in the active and passive, this eccentric boy was all life and energy in the one, and stupidity and laziness in the other. Some believed him the victim of hereditary taint, and were disposed to condone his faults, arguing that he would outgrow them. But, try as they would, it seemed a hopeless case of making anything out of the overgrown lad, but a hun-

ter and trapper. He could learn and did learn to read and write without any apparent effort, but he made the rifle and trap, as well as the habits of the deer, the otter, the beaver, and in fact all game animals, his principal study. He had the patience to sit all day and watch a colony of otter at play sliding down the bank, while an hour's labor of any kind was most painful, and generally threw him into the sulks.

The settlers finally became tired of this and concluded to get rid of him; so they purchased the best rifle to be got hold of at that time, with a good supply of ammunition, and a lot of traps, and bid him speed in the calling he seemed to love so well.

Basil was anxious to get away as he knew the settlers were to have him go, but, when the time came to depart, he found he had more friends in the settlement than he thought. In fact, none of them were enemies; but, in the boys of about his own age, he found genuine friends who were sorely pained to see him leave them.

Thirty miles northwest of Hickory Point Basil found a deserted cabin standing on the banks of a little lake whose outlet was into the Des Moines River. The building was surrounded by a few hickory and cottonwood trees with an outskirt of plum and hazel thickets. It seemed a good location for his purpose, and so he took possession of the place and went to work. In trapping he succeeded beyond all expectation, and a few months after his departure he reappeared in Hickory Point one day, with a canoe loaded with peltries. He repaid the settlers for the outfit furnished him, purchased supplies and departed.

Twice a year at least, he visited the Point to sell and buy, and the feelings of the settlers toward him now had become so changed that he was received and entertained as an honored guest. At the time we introduce him, he was on his way to Hickory Point to procure his fall and winter supplies.

The bullet from the rifle whose report had aroused him from one of his old-time stupors, seemed to pass so close to his head that he believed it had been fired with murderous intent, and the prospect of some excitement to break the monotony of his voyage, quickened the latent fire of energy into a blaze to which every sense and every fiber of the body quickly responded.

For a moment the Boy Trapper was all alertness—flashing his glances along the shore for a glimpse of his would-be assassin. His eyes caught sight of a cloud of smoke rising above a clump of bushes, and quickly raising his rifle, he was about to send an exploring bullet into the thicket, when a peal of merry laughter greeted his ears.

The young trapper lowered his rifle, and, as he did so, caught the flutter of female garments among the shrubbery, and then, into plain view on the bank, waving their hats above their heads, came two young girls, who were immediately followed by a youth of eighteen, carrying a rifle. The faces of the three were aglow with merriment, and Blundering Basil at once joined in the laughter, for he recognized the three as Tom Dayton and his sister Jennie, and Fanny Moore—young people of Hickory Point.

Taking up the paddle, Basil headed his boat for the shore, and soon he was shaking hands with his young friends.

Tom Dayton was a tall, manly youth, with a clear, brown eye and a bright, open countenance. His sister Jennie was a year or two his junior, possessed of a slender, sylph-like form, a deep-blue eye, a pretty face and a sweet, vivacious spirit.

Fanny Moore was a young girl of sixteen, a handsome, dark-eyed little creature, upon whose sun-kissed face lurked roguish dimples, and in whose eyes shone the light of a merry-hearted girl.

"Well, by smokyzooper!" exclaimed Basil, after he had greeted the young people, "so you folks tried to assassinate me, eh?"

"It was I, Basil," confessed Jennie, her blue eyes sparkling, "that put brother Tom up to fire a shot over you, for Fanny thought it would be so funny to see you jump."

"Well, I jumped, didn't I?" the young trapper queried; "and it's all right, gals; but it'd been awful if I'd 'a' blundered a shot into that thicket and killed somebody. But, say, what are you folks doing 'way up here, anyhow?"

"Nutting," answered Tom; "that is, Jen and Fan are, and I'm their pack-horse."

"And we've had splendid success, too; doesn't that look like it?" and Jennie held out her hands, showing her fingers that were brown with nut-stain.

"Yes, they've got two bushels of nuts for me

to pack home, and I've a notion to dump them in the river," growled Tom.

"Chuck 'em into my boat," suggested Basil, "and yerselves, too, and I'll float the whole outfit down to the Point;" which proposition was no sooner made than accepted, and in a few minutes all were adrift on the river.

CHAPTER II.

A GRAND DEER-HUNT.

BASIL was unusually lively during that river journey. He joked and laughed with the young people and told pleasant stories that were quite entertaining and amusing, for he was famous as a story-teller.

To Jennie and Fanny he seemed to have grown into another being since he left the Point. In his pleasant, manly voice, his flashing bright eyes, and his splendid *physique*, there was much that woman admires in the opposite sex.

"Basil," Tom Dayton said as a thought finally occurred to him, "I'm glad you've come down to the Point. We're goin' to have a royal old deer-hunt, and to make sure that game enough is secured to last all a year, a prize of fifteen dollars has been offered to the outsider who'll kill the most game in a certain time."

"That so? Hadn't heard of it," said the young trapper.

"I was afraid you hadn't; but you're just in time to take a hand if you want to. Besides the prize, each hunter will get three shillings for every deer he kills, so that he'll be well paid if he don't win the prize."

"By smokyzooper!" exclaimed Basil, "I must have that prize or bust a tug tryin' for it."

"Oh, I hope you'll win it, Basil!" Jennie exclaimed, seeming to become more and more interested in the young Hercules, though wholly unconscious of the fact.

"You'll have some hard fellers to buck against, Bass," Tom Dayton said, "for already Old Natty Thorndyke from over on the Big Sioux, and Jack Arp from the Wapsipinnicon are on hand, ready for business. They say Arp's a holy screamer on the hunt. He's got a rifle the same make as yours, and I saw him put ten bullets in succession inside of an inch circle at thirty paces. Besides, he's a great wrestler and has throwed every man in the settlement that dared try him. Big Bill Hohn, who'd never met his match before, got his trotters flipped into the air too nice. And then, Arp's a sort of a dandified chap. He wears his hair long and well soaped, and his leggin's and moccasins are more than fancy, and with all, he's sweeter'n wild honey on Jen, and, as Jen holds the prize, he said it'd be the 'way-uppest hour of his life to receive the money from her fair (walnut-stained) hands, and he'll break his neck to win that prize."

"Tom, you mean thing?" exclaimed Jennie; "I hope Basil will win the prize for I don't like Jack Arp one bit."

"Oh, ho!" exclaimed Tom, "that's an admission, Bass, that she *does* like you! Well, I second her motion in the wish for you to win, for Arp thinks he's so all-fired, killin' smart, 'cause he can shoot and wrestle that I'd just yoop to see him beat out of his beaded moccasins."

"I'll give him a rustle, anyhow," Basil declared. "I know these parts as well as the next fellow, and I might blunder onto a good run of luck."

Thus the four conversed until they landed on the shore at Hickory Point.

By the earnest request of both Tom and Jennie, Basil became their guest at their widowed mother's cabin. They found supper awaiting their arrival, for it was nearly dark, and after they had refreshed themselves, and Basil had conversed a few minutes with Mrs. Dayton, the two boys went over to the Trading Post. Basil had a small bundle of furs to sell; besides both of them were eager to learn further particulars about the coming hunt.

The "Trading Post" was a general variety store kept by Ward Brothers, who, besides dispensing groceries, dry-goods, and ammunition to the settlers, drove a lively trade in furs and peltries with the hunters and Indians for miles around.

It was dark when the boys reached the store, which was lighted up with tallow dips. Most of the male population of Hickory Point had already assembled there. Jack Arp and Sidney, Bush—the latter Arp's friend who had come to the settlement with him—as well as Old Natty Thorndyke, were also there.

Blundering Basil's arrival in the village was already known, and when he entered the store he was greeted by a few voices in tones that a more sensitive person would not have regarded

as very complimentary. But this greeting came from rude-mannered men who looked upon the young man in the same light all did when he left the point three years before.

Tom Dayton felt keenly the want of respect shown his friend, and would have resented it in words had he not seen that Basil regarded the rude remarks with something of his old-time indifference, and went on shaking hands with all those who came forward to greet him.

"Here, Jack Arp," exclaimed Paul Bates, one of the few fellows who would make sport of the young trapper; "come over; I want to introduce you to our Blunderin' Basil."

Jack Arp advanced a few steps, looked at Basil, and then with a smile turned away without saying one word. He seemed to regard the young trapper as unworthy of his attention.

"He's the same 'stupid head' as of yore," a voice in the back of the room was heard to say.

Basil heard the remark but paid no more attention to it than if it had been a yelp of a coyote.

Natty Thorndyke, a bushy-bearded old border-man of sixty years, with a pleasant, steel-gray eye and a kindly voice, came up and shaking hands with Basil, said:

"Youngster, I've hearn heaps 'bout you here, to-night, and it made me anxious to see ye. Reckon you'll take a hand in the prize hunt, eh?"

"That's what I'm here for, uncle," responded the youth.

Sidney Bush burst into a roar of laughter at what he considered the conceit of a stupid boy.

This was more than Tom Dayton could stand and he piped out so that all heard him:

"Some of you fellows may laugh out of the other side of your mouths before this thing's over with!"

"Sh! Tom!" whispered Basil to his friend; "let them talk. I read in one of Squire Smith's books that the shallows murmur while the deeps are dumb."

Already Sam Ward had prepared a map of all the country for ten miles around the Point. Every stream was indicated, and these streams were to form the boundaries of each of the "prize hunters' territory. There were now three contestants, counting Blundering Basil, and so three sections of territory were mapped out for them.

All that part lying north of the Point and between the Des Moines and Dry Creek was to comprise one section. All between Dry Creek and Honey Creek, the second; and all between Honey Creek and the river on the south, the third. The area of the three was pretty equally divided. All the rest of the territory the settlers themselves were to take.

The hunt was to begin on the morrow and last four days.

Selection of territory by the three contestants was made that night. The order of selection was by casting lots. Arp drew to first choice, and Basil second. The Wapsie hunter, as Arp had been dubbed, chose that section lying between the river and Dry Creek. Basil took that which would have been his choice even if he had had first selection—lying between Dry and Honey Creeks, and Thorndyke the other.

It was distinctly understood that each of the hunters must confine all his operations to his own territory. A deer killed across the line on the territory of another, would be forfeited to the owner of that territory. The banks of the streams designated were to be the limits.

The next thing in order was the selection of game-carriers. Arp took his friend, Sidney Bush. Tom Dayton did not exactly indorse the selection, but as neither Basil nor Thorndyke entered a protest, he kept still. Basil selected Uncle Phil Berry, than whom there was no more honest or trustworthy in the settlement. Thorndyke allowed the settlers to assign him a man, as all were strangers to him.

The preliminaries for the hunt all arranged, Basil disposed of his furs, purchased a supply of powder and lead, and then he and Tom returned to the Dayton cabin, and spent two hours in molding bullets. Every one of the bright little spheres was critically examined by the young trapper, and if the slightest defect was found, back it went into the ladle.

At precisely midnight the youths retired.

CHAPTER III.

THE FUN BEGINS.

WHEN Tom Dayton arose at daybreak next morning, he heard some one outside the cabin whistling as merry as a lark. He looked out

and saw it was Blundering Basil, his eyes sparkling, his face aglow, and all his energies of mind and body aroused for action.

Breakfast was prepared by the eager, hopeful Jennie, and soon as it had been dispatched Basil was ready to depart. He found Uncle Phil Berry with his pack-horse awaiting him outside.

As he turned to bid the women good-by, Jennie approached him with an anxious look, saying:

"Basil, do your best, and if you win I'll add to the prize already offered a—"

"A kiss, laughingly interposed the young trapper, and without waiting for the blushing maiden's reply, he was off.

Soon the settlement was deserted by all save the women and children.

All but four men went away on the hunt, some of them declaring that they were going to beat the hunters, even if they could get no prize nor exclusive territory.

Game was quite abundant and everybody knew that Blundering Basil had the best territory, but no one believed he could win against old and experienced hunters like Arp and Thorndyke.

By noon the Wapsie hunter had sent in three deer. They were taken to the slaughter-house, where they were dressed by two men detailed for that purpose. Besides giving each game-bearer a receipt for every deer delivered, they also kept a careful account of each man's work. It was understood that the list of each hunter be kept a secret, not only from the hunters themselves, but from all others, until the contest had ended. This made the affair all the more lively and uncertain.

Jennie Dayton, who was on the alert, noticed the coming of Arp's man first. The discovery filled her breast with deep regret and bitter disappointment, for she was just superstitious enough to regard it as an ill-omen. However, as Uncle Phil came in soon afterward, his horse loaded down, her spirits revived. But, day in and day out she watched the coming and going of the game-carriers in suspense, her spirits alternating between hope and fear.

Meanwhile Blundering Basil was doing his level best and having fine success. He did not go in at night, but slept in the woods, Uncle Phil taking him his meals prepared by the anxious Jennie Dayton.

Toward the close of the third day Basil shot a doe almost on the very brink of Dry Creek. Uncle Phil was close at hand, and, while they were tying it upon the pack-horse, they heard the report of a gun over on Arp's territory. It seemed to have come from but a short distance away, and before the echoes had ceased, the crack of another rifle was heard to come from the same territory, but in a different direction.

"Uncle, did you hear that?" queried Basil.

"I did, Basil," replied the old settler, "and I tell you them reports wasn't made by the same gun. Jist as sure as you're born thar's more'n one man huntin' over thar. Mind you, I wouldn't say the Wapsie hunter is takin' advantage o' you and Thorndyke by havin' some one he's him, but it might pay you to inquire into the matter."

"Uncle, I mistrusted this mornin' there was somethin' wrong over on that side. I heard two guns fired almost simultaneous, and they seemed to be a mile apart. But, say nothin'. To-night I'm goin' over there to investigate matters. "I don't propose to be beaten by rascally work."

"Them's my sentiments, boy!" declared Uncle Phil; "I hope you'll find things all right, however."

The next morning when the old settler rejoined Basil, almost the first words the latter spoke were to say:

"Well, I made a reconnoissance over on Arp's territory the other night, and what do you s'pose I blundered onto?"

"Some friend that's helpin' him," replied Berry.

"A party of five Indians with whom Arp spent the night."

"The scoundrel!" exclaimed Uncle Phil, indignantly; "expose him! expose him, Basil! Enter a protest, confound him! enter a protest against his count! Why, they're bettin', now, at the Point, two to one on Arp. You can't s'pect to win 'ginst five Ingins and a dumb rascal! Kick it all over, Basil, kick like a bull-moose! Have your rights if ye have to fight for 'em, and Old Phil Berry 'll stay with ye long as he can crook a finger, or bat an eye!"

"Keep cool and quiet, Uncle Phil!" calmly advised Basil; "be as stupid as I am sometimes. Don't chirp a word, and when the time comes I'll blunder onto the proper thing for that

Wapsie hunter. You see, I could not swear, nor can I prove, the Indians are helpin' him. I want to make sure of some proof first, then I'll go in like a smokyzooper."

Uncle Phil having cooled down agreed to keep quiet, although the fear of losing the bet he had made on Basil with Sidney Bush, kept his mind in a state of unrest.

And so the work went on. That was the last day of the hunt, and it proved to be the best of the four for Basil. He had killed eight deer and started down Dry Creek toward the Point, Uncle Phil following him. The sun was nearly two hours high. Basil had hoped to get another deer on his way in. He was nearing the point where he would leave the creek to go direct to the settlement, when a large buck sprung from somewhere into the dry channel of the creek, stopped and sniffed the air as if in doubt as to the source of impending danger.

Quick as a flash Blundering Basil brought his rifle to his shoulder and fired. The deer leaped forward a few feet and fell dead.

Basil drew his knife, sprung down the bank and advanced to cut its throat. As he did so, Jack Arp sprung down the opposite side, knife in hand, and advancing, said:

"That's my deer!"

"Yours?" exclaimed Blundering Basil in surprise.

"That's what I said!" answered Arp, stooping and cutting the animal's jugular."

"I shot it," Basil declared.

"And so did I," responded Arp; "we fired together."

"That's singular—the first I knew of it. We'll see," the young hunter remarked.

They examined the deer, and, true enough, found two bullet-holes in the head, one at the base of the right ear, the other at the base of the left. Either was a fatal shot.

In the mean time the game-bearer of each came up, and was informed of the singular state of affairs.

"There's no denying we both shot it," said Basil; "that's clear enough."

"But I claim the deer," replied Arp, "on the ground of it's havin' fallen nearest my territory, as all can see."

"That's a small margin, by thunder, it is!" blurted Uncle Phil.

"Men," spoke up old Sidney Bush, "it's not at all likely that this 'ere deer'll be necessary to settle the dispute one way, so there's no need a-quarrelin' 'bout it."

"Whether it's necessary or not, I shall claim the deer!" declared Arp, in a tone calculated to be final.

"We'll see," was Basil's reply.

It was agreed that the deer be loaded upon Bush's horse, and, when so secured, the four set out for Hickory Point.

When they reached the settlement everybody was in a fever of excitement, and impatient to know the result, upon which every man had made a wager, even Deacon Squire Smith betting a bushel of hulled walnuts against a gallon of rum on Basil.

The settlers were at once confronted with the singular dispute over the buck which both Arp and Basil had shot, and it was the unanimous opinion that the matter should be settled before the general result of the hunt was made known.

Basil proposed that it be thrown out and counted to neither. To this Arp objected.

Then Arp's backers would make a proposition which Basil's friends would peremptorily reject. This wrangling was kept up until it was evident bad blood was being engendered. Deacon Smith became so excited that he declared he would fight, if necessary, for his rights.

"I don't keer a shuck for thet bushel o' war-nuts, but—"

"It's the gallon o' rum you want," broke in old Major Cooley, and then the settlers had to interfere to prevent the old pioneers from pummeling each other.

The excitement drew the eager Jennie Dayton near the wrangling crowd. Jack Arp caught sight of her pretty face turned toward him, and construing the eager look thereon as being for for his success, an idea was suggested to his mind, and approaching Basil, he said, in a tone of haughty importance:

"Look here, stupid! I've another and last proposition, and that is that we make a statement to Miss Jennie Dayton, and let her decide the dispute—her decision to be final."

"I blunder to that, child of the Wapsipinnicon," was Basil's cheery response.

Jennie Dayton shrunk back, half frightened by the idea suggested. In fact she would have fled the place had her mischievous, impulsive brother not caught her by the arm and half-

dragged her into the presence of the disputants, saying:

"Come, Judge Jennie Dayton; you must hear this cause and decide. Gentlemen, court's now in session!"

"And I wish you were before the court for sentence," Jennie exclaimed, flashing a reproachful look at her roguish brother.

After some urging, and the earnest request of Basil, the maiden consented to hear the disputants' statements and decide the matter to the best of her judgment.

Jack Arp made an elaborate statement, laying emphasis upon the fact that the deer fell nearest to his side of the creek—a fact Blundering Basil did not gainsay.

After he had finished there was deep silence. Basil became conscious that all eyes were now fixed upon him, and after a few moments' reflection, he said:

"Bear in mind, Miss Jennie, that Jack Arp's territory was between the river and Dry Creek. Mine between Dry Creek and Honey. The deer was shot dead in the dry bed of the creek. Let the court decide and I will abide."

Jennie looked at Arp and then at Basil. Her face was perceptibly pale, yet never more beautiful. She bit her nether lip as if to restrain some unbidden thought from expression in words, then, after a moment's reflection, she said in a clear voice:

"I must decide the deer belongs to neither, or else equally to both, for it was killed on neutral ground."

Upon hearing this decision a shout burst from the settlers. Basil threw his cap high in the air and gave an exultant "whoop!" Jack Arp's face clouded with disappointment, but, quickly recovering his presence of mind, he said, with a forced smile, to Jennie:

"A just decision by a just judge, Miss Dayton."

Again the crowd cheered.

"Now," a settler finally exclaimed, "let's hear the result of the hunt from the butchers."

Mr. Nebrow, one of the butchers, mounted a stump, paper in hand. A dead silence fell upon the crowd. Then in a clear voice that all could hear, Mr. Nebrow made the following announcement:

"Natty Thorndyke killed twenty-five deer."

"Jack Arp killed thirty-one deer."

"And Basil thirty-one deer—a tie between Arp and Basil."

For a moment there was a dead silence following the announcement. The settlers could hardly comprehend the situation—that Basil and Arp had tied on thirty-one each. They thought Nebrow was joking. Arp thought so, too.

Presently some one "hurrahed" for Blundering Basil; then some one yelled for Arp, and this was followed by a general confusion and animated discussion of the "tie."

"Gentlemen," Mr. Nebrow called out from his perch on the stump, "it's growin' late. The sun 'll soon be down. This matter hasn't been settled yet. The decision of Jennie leaves it just where it was in the slaughter-house. Now, Arp, how'll you and Blunderin' Bass settle it?"

"Anyway 'll suit me," answered Basil.

"Then how'd you like to shoot it off?" asked Arp, turning abruptly on the young trapper.

"Smokyzoopers! Jist my size at one hundred and fifty yards," declared Basil, so quickly that it almost deprived Arp of his breath.

"Mebby," retorted Arp, with a sneer, "you'd as lief wrestle?"

"Wrestle?" exclaimed the Boy Trapper—"yes, anything to please you. We'll take it Ingin fashion—stand twenty paces apart; at the word we'll start and meet each other and catch-as-catch-can and go in grizzlies—one fall to settle it. Oh, yes! I'd as soon wrestle as eat, though it's been a good while since I had hold of a grizzly bear or a tornado."

"All right—one fall," repeated Arp, for, since he was an expert as a wrestler, he had no doubt of his ability to down the big, clumsy-looking boy.

Basil's friends became disheartened. Arp was a young man of thirty—strong and agile as a panther—whose skill had been witnessed a few days before; and very few believed there was a ghost of a chance for the boy. In fact, Deacon Smith declared that further proceedings would be a mere matter of form, and that his "warnuts" were goners.

Jennie Dayton, sorely disappointed, turned and went home, half-wishing that Arp had won in the hunt rather than see Basil lose now and in a way that must be humiliating to him. She had heard the men expressing their opinions as to the result of the contest, and all hope for the young trapper was dispelled from her breast.

It was growing dusk and no time was to be lost in finishing up the contest.

Jack Arp threw off his cap, his hunting-jacket, and tightened his belt, and with an air of supreme confidence took his position with folded arms to await the pleasure of his opponent.

Basil divested himself of his superfluous clothing and stepped to his position, twenty paces from, and facing, the Wapsie hunter. Those near him were sensibly impressed with the demeanor of the boy. He seemed to undergo one of his sudden transformations. The light that shone with a steady glow in his fine eyes, and the look of resolution and fixed determination upon his now keenly intelligent face, seemed to change his entire countenance. The great knots and bunches of muscles on his arms and limbs, his broad chest, and the chords of his neck seemed swelling to twice their usual size with an unnatural strength that had hitherto lain dormant within him.

A profound silence again fell upon the crowd when it had been so arranged as to witness the contest.

Sam Ward was to give the signal for the start. He took his position half-way between the disputants. He raised his hand and called, "Attention!" Arp and Basil settled themselves for the start.

After a moment's pause Ward called out: "One, two, three—GO!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE BEGINNING OF THE HOLIDAY.

LIKE deer starting from their lair, Basil and Jack Arp shot toward each other, their eyes flashing, their teeth set. So swift were their movements that it seemed but an instant until they came together with a dull crash; then the spectators saw the bowing and writhing and spinning of the two forms, the swinging and twisting of limbs, the straining of rigid arms; when, all of a sudden, they saw a pair of heels rise into the air, describe a curve and then a form fall with a heavy thud upon the earth.

There was a wild surge forward. A yell rent the twilight shadows. Jack Arp lay prone upon the earth, half-stunned by the terrific force of his fall.

Blundering Basil had won the prize!

His backers became almost frantic with joy. Deacon Squire Smith demanded and received his rum, and because, from abstraction of mind, consequent upon the excitement of the evening, he went to bed with his boots on, the busybodies of the place strongly and wickedly hinted that the good and pious old man was gloriously drunk!

With a look of chagrin and mortification upon his face, Jack Arp picked himself up, brushed the dust from his clothes, put on his coat and cap, saying:

"I deserved defeat, for overconfidence did it; but, let the bull-moose have the prize, for little good it'll do him."

To those who saw the expression on the man's face as he spoke there seemed to be a covert threat in his words. If Basil noticed it he gave it no heed whatever, but said:

"I've had a tussle to earn it, seein' as what I've had not only you, but half a dozen Ingins to buck ag'inst."

"What do you mean, lubber?" exclaimed Arp, turning like a tiger upon the young trapper.

"Just what I say!" returned Basil, coolly, defiantly. "You had half a dozen Ingins up the river helpin' you!"

"You lie!" hissed Arp.

But, no sooner had he uttered the words than "spat" went Basil's big fist into the fellow's face and again the hunter from the Wapsie measured his length on the earth. Nor did he rise at once for the blow had dazed him.

Without another word Blundering Basil turned and walked slowly away toward the Widow Dayton's cabin, whither Tom had already preceded him with the news of his victory.

The widow and her daughter met the young trapper at the door, and bestowed upon him the warmest congratulations. Finally, Jennie, with three golden half-eagles lying in her extended hand, said:

"Basil, here is the prize money you have honorably won."

Basil reached out and grasped, not only the money, but the hand that held it, and drawing Jennie to him planted a kiss fairly on her cheek, saying, with a laugh, as he did so:

"That was nominated in the bond, too, as Deacon Smith says."

Jennie drew back, a maidenly blush suffusing her face, and when she detected Tom chuckling with laughter, she felt half inclined to resent Basil's liberty over Tom's head.

Basil held the gold pieces in his hand and looked at them a few moments, little dreaming that they were the price of enmity, suffering, peril, death! Finally he threw them into the lap of the Widow Dayton, saying:

"Mrs. Dayton, I'll give them to you. I don't need 'em; besides, I'd lose them just sure."

"No, no, Basil!" the widow protested: "you've earned the money by hard labor. Keep it—save it for the future."

"The fun I had beatin' that Wapsie dandy more'n paid me for all my labor, Mrs. Dayton. You keep the money and use it."

"Oh, thank you, Basil!" the widow exclaimed, with tears in her eyes; "you are a big-hearted and noble boy, Basil. May God protect you, is my humble prayer!"

Jack Arp and his friend Bush remained at Hickory Point two days after the hunt was over, though Tom and Jennie Dayton managed it so that Basil and he did not meet again; for it was well known that the Wapsie hunter's blood was up, and that he would have endeavored to obtain satisfaction for the blow Basil gave him should they meet. When he left, however, he was in his usual good spirits, promising to return to Hickory Point whenever occasion offered.

As to Basil's charge of Arp having Indians assist him, there was great diversity of opinion. No one believed the boy had willfully misrepresented the fact, but thought there was a mistake somewhere. But, as all the Indians in the country were at peace with the whites, notwithstanding the reported threats of the followers of one Ishtababa, the presence of the six seen by Basil occasioned no uneasiness. During the hunting and trapping seasons the red-men wandered up and down the river at will, many of them stopping to trade at the Point; and it was now about time they were along. In fact, it was in anticipation of their coming that the settlers had hurried up a grand hunt so as to secure a supply of venison while the deer were plentiful.

Three days after the departure of Arp, Blundering Basil left Hickory Point for his trapping-grounds near "Round Lake." He was accompanied by his friends, Tom Dayton and Charlie Burch, who had long been promised a holiday by their friends. It had been a great desire of these two boys to visit Basil, and spend a few weeks with him hunting and trapping, and they now had the opportunity to gratify this desire.

Charlie Burch was a young man of seventeen, tall and well-built, and possessed of courage, strength and endurance, and withal, a big-hearted and jovial boy.

At the end of the second day after leaving the Point, the trio reached Basil's cabin. Everything was found just as the young trapper had left it, and that night Tom and Charlie ate their first meal in a hunter's cabin.

After supper was over and night had set in, Basil said to his friends, as they sat before the fire on the hearth:

"To-morrow, boys, we'll take the traps and strike out. We'll cross to the north side of the lake in a canoe to save a big walk around. Then we'll proceed to Deep Creek, on this side of the river, and set some traps for beaver. Then we'll bear off to the river, cross that stream in a dug-out I have there concealed, set traps along Owl Creek, Plum Creek, and at an otter slide or two, then fetch up for the night at Mole Cave."

"What's Mole Cave?" asked Charlie Burch.

"Mole Cave is a dug-out, or cave, on the banks of the river at the further end of my beat," explained Basil. "I generally leave here in the morning, visit my traps, stay all night at the dug-out, and the next mornin' start for here again. After we've set the traps and made a few trips, we'll take a whirl among the deer over in the brakes beyond the river; and the squirrels and raccoons down in the big timber at Big Bend. Oh, we'll have an artistic time, by the great smokyzoopers! I have promised your holidays should be full of fun and excitement, and I'll jist bu'st a tug to make it all you could wish for."

Highly elated with this assurance the boys retired early, and by sunrise next morning they were up and ready to start on their first round with Blundering Basil.

The three embarked in a light log canoe or dug-out for the north side of the lake, for, by so doing, they would save a walk of over two miles.

"Round Lake," as Basil had named the little sheet, was about one hundred and fifty acres in area. It was fully one hundred rods wide. The first half of this distance was clear, open water, but the rest was grown up with a perfect wilderness of tall reeds, flags, and wild-rice plants through which it would have been impossible to force a canoe, but for the fact that the beaver, otter, and muskrats had cut both wide and narrow passages running in all directions, and along which a boat could pass. Into the widest of one of these thoroughfares running north and south, Basil guided the canoe; then laying aside his paddle, he forced the craft along by pulling upon the reeds, first upon one side and then upon the other. By this means the light shell was glided rapidly through the narrow street, and in a few minutes the northern shore was reached. Landing, they secured the boat, concealed the paddle, and then struck out across the prairie.

The weather was all that heart could wish. The air was warm and balmy. The blue haze of "Indian summer" hung over the landscape like the vision of a dream. A faint breeze drifting from the south stirred the tall, dry grass into waves which, in turn, seemed to give the undulations of the plain a motion like the gentle swell of ocean billows.

Ever and anon the young hunters saw a deer go speeding away before them, his sleek, glossy coat glinting in the morning sun like a silver shield, while, in every direction, almost, they could see coyotes singly and in pairs leaping away into the hazy distance.

Five miles from Round Lake they struck Deep Creek, a small, but deep stream, flowing east and emptying into the Des Moines River. There were two beaver-dams on this creek, and at each of these Blundering Basil instructed the amateurs in the secret of setting beaver-traps. After both dams had been visited, and two traps set at each, the three bore off toward the northeast and finally reached the river at a point opposite the mouth of Owl Creek.

At this place Basil had an old dug-out concealed. The boat was launched and the three crossed the river. Proceeding up Owl Creek to some beaver-dams, they set a few traps, then crossed the country to Plum Creek, which stream they followed back to the river. Then they proceeded on up the latter—stopping at two or three bayous to set some traps for otter—and finally arrived at Mole Cave, about sunset.

They spent the night in the dug-out sleeping upon couches of freshly-gathered autumn leaves. Food they had brought with them, and a pleasant night they passed in "Mole Cave."

Early the next morning they started on their return to Round Lake, visiting the traps set the previous day as they retraced their steps.

On the third day they again started on the same round. All went well until they came to one of the bayous where traps had been set for otter. There Basil found one of his traps had disappeared, and discovered in the yielding soil near, the unmistakable imprint of a moccasined foot. Basil knew at a glance it was that of an Indian, and the young trapper, much to the surprise of his friends, flew into a rage, uttering threats of violence against the thief should he ever come across him.

The Indian's track being fresh, Basil set off to follow it, and his companions could do nothing else but go with him.

To the surprise of all they came suddenly upon the Indian, who was moving slowly up the river. He was a young Sioux buck, with a slender form, a low retreating forehead, high cheekbones and small, snakish-black eyes. His feet and limbs were clad in buckskin, while his body, from the waist up, was covered with a greasy, red blanket, drawn over his shoulders and girded around his waist with a belt from which depended a hunting-knife and tomahawk—the only weapons he carried.

The red-skin appeared but little surprised by the boy's sudden appearance. In fact, he maintained a haughty indifference to their presence which, coupled with a recollection of the six red-skins in whose camp he had seen Jack Arp, added fresh fuel to Basil's burning rage. Stepping in front of the buck, the young trapper commanded:

"Stop, thief!"

The Indian stopped, giving utterance to a low grunt, at the same time casting a quick, furtive glance at each of the whites.

"See here!" Basil continued, "you stole one of my traps, and if you don't give it up I'll knock your head off your shoulders! Open that blanket and hand out that trap!"

"Not got trap," quickly replied the Indian—"Running Wolf no thief—ugh!"

"You have got my trap concealed under that dirty blanket!" retorted Basil, his eyes flashing.

"Not got trap," the Indian again declared. "Your tongue's crooked, you thief!" Basil cried, and he struck the red-man a blow on the breast that staggered him backward, and he was about to repeat it when Tom Dayton stepped between, saying:

"Basil, don't strike him again; I believe he has told you the truth."

Basil turned in his rage upon Tom and for a moment it seemed he was going to strike him. They gazed squarely into each other's eyes. Basil's face was white with rage, his fist clinched and drawn to strike, but the calm, fearless look of his friend quickly reminded him of what he was about to do, and with a look of deep regret, he said, as he dropped his hand:

"Pardon me, Tom."

Tom smiled.

The Indian stepped from before Basil and walked on. He did not hurry or show the least sign of fear. On the contrary, there was an implied defiance in the slowness of his steps, and it struck Tom Dayton then that the blow Basil had dealt him might some time cost the impulsive trapper most dearly.

"Confound the sneakin' wretch!" Basil said; "he's as stolid as a log. He may not have the trap, but I'll bet he knows somethin' 'bout it. The only way to get along with vagabond Ingins is to kick 'em right into the atmosphere, and let them know they can't baboon around you."

"Bass," said Charlie Burch, "that Ingin's got grit. He's no coward for an Ingin, and you may hear from him again."

"Let him come; I'm just hot enough to stay with him. I never did like an Ingin, and I guess the dislike is mutual."

The three resumed their journey to the dug-out. Basil soon cooled down to his normal temperature, and discussed the incident of the lost trap in a spirit of levity; but his friends could see, all the while, that he was uneasy about something or other, and finally, after they had reached Mole Cave, the whole secret cropped out in this remark:

"Boys, I'm goin' to cross the river and go up to Big Bend 'bout a mile, and see if there isn't a gang o' that red-skin's friends camped there. If there be, it'll pay us, meebby, to keep a watch on them, for you can't tell 'bout an Ingin always."

Tom and Charlie helped him to drag his canoe to the river and launch it, then sat down on the bank and watched him off.

By this time it was getting quite dark, and, as Basil had been predicting all day, there had come a change in the weather in that the wind had shifted into the north, and was blowing quite strongly—scattering dark gray clouds over the sky and hiding the moon, which was then in the zenith.

"I tell you, Tom," said young Burch, as Basil pulled across the river, "Bass is uneasy. I'll guarantee he wishes he hadn't let his temper get away with him to-day when we come across that Ingin."

"Basil's a freak, sure," replied Tom; "he's full of eccentric moods and tempers, but withal a noble, generous fellow."

The two amateurs saw Basil land a few rods down the river where the bank was low, turn, and proceed up-stream. He had gained a point nearly opposite them when they suddenly saw a number of shadowy forms rise up out of the earth, as it were, and confront him. Nor were they long kept in doubt as to what those forms were. They heard a yell that they knew came from the throat of an enraged Indian. At the same moment they saw one of the red-skins fly at Basil. They saw the two, apparently incorporated into one figure, whirling about and finally go down.

"My Lord! Charlie," exclaimed Tom, springing to his feet, "the Indians are over there, and have ambushed our friend!"

"Yes, and they're a dozen to one," replied Charlie; "there's no earthly show for Basil. We cannot aid him with the river between us. Running Wolf is avenging that blow."

Standing like statues, their eyes strained into the gloom, the boys knew not what course to pursue.

Suddenly they heard a loud plash in the river followed by excited Indian yells. Full well they knew its dreadful meaning: the combatants had rolled into the river and added a new and relentless foe—the water—to the conflict.

Dreadful indeed was Tom and Charlie's suspense. They knew the water at the point of conflict was deep, and there was little or no hope for Basil.

The Indians on the bank encouraged their friend by yells and shouts; but, owing to the

height of the bank, none of them ventured in to assist him. But, finally, two or three of them, who seemed to have known that Basil had left a canoe below, ran down and boarding the craft paddled up to the scene of conflict. But by this time all sounds of the struggle had ceased, and, by the way the canoe went groping about in the water, the boys felt certain that neither of the combatants could be found, but that both had gone down in death in the embrace of the silent river.

CHAPTER V.

A NEW DANGER.

TOM DAYTON and Charlie Burch stood as if transfixed—silent, speechless, their eyes staring out across the river. They could see the dimmest outlines of the boat—they could hear the dip of the paddle, and while they stood watching its movements they saw it turn and start toward their side of the river!

Satisfied that to remain there longer was at the risk of their own lives, they took their rifles, stole away down the river and secreted themselves in the shadows about twenty rods from the dug-out.

From this point they watched the boat. They saw two of the Indians land, while the third one recrossed the river and brought over his friends, when all proceeded to the cave.

Creeping back to the boat the boys boarded it and drifted noiselessly down the river in the deepest shadows. Finally they crossed to the opposite side and, sending the boat adrift, waited fully an hour there in hopes of hearing something of Basil. But, disappointed in this, they turned, with sad and heavy hearts, and struck out for Round Lake.

After traversing half a mile of woods they entered the great prairie and, while lamenting the death of their brave, impulsive, and eccentric young friend, they felt that they were beyond immediate danger for the time being. But alas! how sudden, how terrible was their disappointment! They had made but little over half the distance to the lakelet when, upon gaining the bluffs south of Deep Creek, *They discovered the prairie behind them on fire!*

The wind was blowing almost a gale, driving the flame down toward them at frightful speed. From the very edge of the timber, now two miles to their left, and fully that far to the right, stretched an unbroken wall of roaring, crackling fire.

That it was the work of Indians to destroy them, they had no doubt. In fact, they could still see firebrands being carried along either extremity of the line and at right angle with it as if the foe intended to surround them with flame.

For a few moments the boys stood and gazed in speechless awe at the awful sight. They knew the danger of a prairie fire driven before a strong wind. They knew it was death to every form of animal life—that the smoke, ashes, and heat, driven low in advance of the fire, bewildered and suffocated everything that breathed, and made the body an easy prey to the flames.

The fire was a mile and a half behind, but advancing so swiftly that they knew escape would be impossible by attempting to get back to the river. They had strong hopes, however, that Deep Creek would check its advance; and so they pushed on. But they soon found that the creek was no more a barrier to the advancing flames than if it had been a deer-path through the dry grass. The long tongues of flame darted across the water into the tall grass on the bank of the little stream, and swept on with renewed speed up the long slope which caught the full force of the north wind.

The boys now realized with a feeling akin to terror that their lives were in the most imminent peril. Unfortunately for them, they had not a single match else they could have started a "backfire," and thereby easily have averted the danger. And to make matters worse, they wasted some precious moments endeavoring to start a fire by discharging their rifles into a bunch of dry grass; and when they had failed in this, they realized that their only salvation lay in reaching Round Lake ahead of the fire. So, summoning every energy of body and mind, they started on the run for their lives.

They refrained from talking, to husband their strength. They ran on never looking back until, on raising a little swell, they saw their shadows on the grass before them, and involuntarily turned their heads and glanced back over their shoulders. The sight that met their gaze was appalling. Their hearts almost sunk in despair. The fire was not over eighty rods away! A mighty curtain of black smoke was rising into

the air and drifting over them, blotting out the moon and stars, and draping the sky with the somber shadows of death. The wall of flame, when the wind struck it with a sudden gust, seemed to fall flat upon the earth and dissolve itself into a million writhing serpents that glided along the ground darting out tongues of hissing, seething fire. And then, when the wind slackened up would rise that quivering, swaying wall, roaring and crackling like the rush of a tornado through a forest.

Around the boys, for a ways at least, it became as light as day, so close was the fire upon them. They could hear the shrieks of prairie-birds, and the flap of their wings as they started in affright from their lowly roost, in the grass, and went whirring away in the night, or fell bewildered and choked to be devoured by the pitiless flame. Now and then they saw a coyote speeding off before them, or a frightened deer galloping away through the glaring light.

To facilitate their speed the boys were finally compelled to throw away their rifles, and all their accouterments. The dull explosion of one of the powder-horns soon after it was discarded caused the fugitives to again look back.

The fire was still gaining upon them. They could almost feel the heat upon their backs. Their strength was fast failing. They struggled hard to keep up their courage, and maintain their presence of mind; and yet the latter was so wrought upon by terror that they fancied they could hear demoniac laughter coming from around them, and that the flames were possessed of an incarnate desire and determination to seize and hurl them lifeless into that darkness of eternity trailing behind.

Gasping out a word of encouragement to his young friend, Tom Dayton led the flight, in a mechanical sort of way.

Both began to lose all definite ideas of the ends sought to save their lives. They could go but little further. The tireless foe would soon be upon them. But at last a blessed sight burst upon their wild, bloodshot eyes. It was the lake!—their haven of safety!

"The lake! the lake, Charlie!" Tom managed to gasp out.

The sight revived their hopes, and gave new strength to their bodies for the last effort for their lives. They reached the dug-out they had left in the morning. Charlie sprang into the craft and fell. Tom followed, sinking to his knees at the feet of his prostrate friend. He could not speak, for his lungs seemed filled with liquid fire. There was a strange roaring in his ears, and his brain was growing dizzy. He reeled to and fro. The dug-out seemed to be sinking down into the water, while the black pall of death settled over and around him. But suddenly, in the midst of his mental and physical suffering, a voice seemed to call to him from out the realms of Somewhere, and he gave a start. The blood receded from his brain, and he rallied his exhausted energies.

Reaching out he seized hold of the reeds, and began dragging the canoe through the water, as Basil had done. Charlie rallied, and rising to his knees, aided him. Together they worked with all their feeble strength, and sent the boat along a beaver-path at a fair rate of speed.

In this way they had made half the distance through the reeds, when their ears were assailed by a terrific roaring behind them. They looked back. Tenfold more appalling was the sight that they now beheld. The fire had reached the margin of the lake, and instead of stopping there, as they had expected, it was sweeping over the water through the dry reeds and flags with the ferocity of a legion of charging demons.

Great, red, writhing, lapping and twisting flames were shooting upward with a hiss and roar as though belched from the mouth of the Inferno. Inky-black smoke rolled in monster billows over their heads. Bunches of reeds, cut off close to the water by the fire, were sucked upward by the heat currents, and for a moment were floating balls of fire in the air.

Death now seemed inevitable, but the momentary respite they had, made the love of life stronger within them, and the idea of escaping by diving under the wall of fire was suggested to Tom. As he spoke to Charlie of this last, desperate chance for life, he took up the paddle, and thrusting it down into the water, measured the depth with the blade and his arm. It was not over five feet deep, and, this fact ascertained, the boys leaped overboard and stood in the water to their necks. Then again they turned, facing the fire. As they did so they caught sight of a dark, spherical object swimming along the beaver-path toward them. At first they took it for a beaver, driven before the

fire, but a second glance told them it was a human head—the head of an Indian!

Instantly they recognized the red-skin as Running Wolf, the very Indian whom Blundering Basil had struck, and as quickly it flashed through their excited brains that he had slain Basil, and was now bent upon their destruction; also, notwithstanding, he was in the very presence of death himself.

The red-skin was coming in as mad haste as the fire behind him, and, as he approached the boys, he raised his tomahawk as if to strike, saying, excitedly!

"Me Running Wolf—no strike pale-face boys—help 'em—save 'em—big fire!"

But, in spite of this declaration, his threatening attitude seemed to give his words the lie, and the boys quickly swung the canoe around across his path. As they did so, the Indian came up, grasped the boat, and with a single movement whirled it upside down; then once, twice, his tomahawk fell upon the bottom of the craft and a hole was made therein.

The next moment the head of the savage disappeared downward in the water, and when the boys saw the boat rising up on the surface of the water, they knew the red-skin had dodged under it to save his life. But greater still was their surprise when they heard the fellow say from under the craft:

"Quick!—come under boat, pale-face—fire no catch 'im here!"

The fire was so close upon them by this time that the heat almost burnt their faces; and, as to death between the flames and the red-skin, they had but a moment to decide. The words of the Indian turned the scale and quickly they dodged under the inverted craft.

The next moment the red tongues of flame were licking the bottom of the shell and roaring and hissing over and around it.

A faint pencil of light streamed into the dark retreat through the hole made by the Indian's hatchet. The air the fugitives breathed became warm and steamy. The sides of the upturned dug-out became almost hot, but they did not take fire, for they were thoroughly water-soaked.

Not a word was spoken by one of the three under the boat, and as the fire swept swiftly over them, and its noise receded southward, the boys began to realize how narrow had been their escape from the flames. But were they safe from death at the hands of the Indians? This thought now came up to trouble them, but its solution was not to be protracted long. The Indian suddenly raised himself to full height, lifted the shell clear of the water, and flung it from over them.

The three now stood in darkness. The fire had reached the margin of the reed and flag forest, and died out. Never did a more blinding gloom hang over the land. The air was full of smoke and ashes, making breathing difficult and painful.

The Indian was the first to move after the boat had been thrown aside. He started toward the shore, saying:

"Boat no good—wade—walk."

For the first time in three hours the boys drew a breath of relief, and started to follow the cunning Indian ashore.

CHAPTER VI.

A GHASTLY OBJECT.

STRANGE and conflicting thoughts swept through the brain of Tom Dayton as he and Charlie followed Running Wolf ashore. He could not understand why the savage should spare their lives and seek that of Blundering Basil, if, indeed, they had not already destroyed their friend. His interference in behalf of the red-skin, when Basil struck him that day, surely could not be the cause of all Running Wolf's kindness to them. And if not, what then were his motives?

The truth would soon be known, for there was no other alternative but to follow the fellow ashore.

The Indian reached the bank a rod in advance of the amateurs, and turning, awaited their coming.

"I am Running Wolf," the red-skin said, as the boys stopped before him. "Your friend, the White-Face Bull, whose cabin is over the lake, struck Running Wolf. Me no steal trap—me no thief. You pale-faces my friend, then—me save you now. We even—we part now—when we meet again we enemies—all my friends your enemy—they find you—they kill and scalp you. Ingins fire prairie to catch young trapper—the White-Face Bull. Me know way he come—way he go—me run swift here to kill him if fire no catch him. He not come—you come. You my

friend to-day—me your friend to-night—we part—you go—me go—when meet again we enemies. Running Wolf has spoken."

Having thus expressed himself the warrior turned and walked away into the blackened plain, leaving the amateurs standing like dumb statues.

"Well, what do you think of that, Tom?" Charlie Burch at length found voice to inquire.

"It beats all I ever heard of—all creation," replied Tom.

"But your preventing Basil strikin' him a second blow has served us a pretty good turn."

"Yes, it saved our lives. I would never have thought of getting under that canoe. But say, Charlie, how is this, anyway, for a holiday on the prairies?"

"Basil promised us a high old time, and so far we've been havin' it; and if we remain here—a ways longer, we'll have more of it. That Ingins took good pains to inform us that he'd paid us all he owed by way of kindness, and that when we met again we'd be enemies."

"That's Ingins honor, to a dot," declared Tom, "and I warrant you that feller 'll take great pains to meet us again, so's to get our scalps. He's a slick savage, and we can count on trouble from him and his friends if we don't scatter out of this. But there is one thing I gained from his talk that made me breathe easier. He said he'd come here to intercept Basil. It must be that Basil escaped death in the river after all."

"But the fire may have caught him," said Charlie.

"We can only hope for the best, Charlie. Let us hasten to the cabin and see if he has reached there; and if not, we'll have to make the best of the cover of this night, for we are perfectly helpless so far as the possession of a gun, or even a knife, is concerned."

So saying they set off around the lake. The sky was still murky, and the air filled with the pungent odors of smoke and ashes. With every inspiration the young huntress seemed to inhale into their lungs an impalpable, burning dust. Their eyes were red and blood-shot, and their faces black as Ethiopians from the ashes of the plain.

As they approached the cabin the darkness and solitude that brooded over the place filled their breasts with a strange dread and fear. The sullen roar of the night wind among the creaking branches of the surrounding trees, and the gurgling ripple of the waves of the lake against the shore made it more deathlike and foreboding.

What if foes were lying in wait for them in the cabin? or in the shadows?

Tom and Charlie were not cowards, but their minds had been so wrought upon within the past few hours that their feverish brains were filled with some unknown fear.

They cautiously approached the door, keeping within the deeper shadows of the trees. Ten paces from the building they stopped to listen.

By this time the wind had swept the sky clear of smoke, and the moonlight, dispelling some of the shadows in front of the cabin, enabled the boys to see that the door was open.

This was not as the cabin had been left in the morning, and they knew at once some one had been there. But who? Could it have been Blundering Basil? Was he inside asleep?—wounded?—dead?

Surely it could not have been a foe else he would have left the door as he found it, if he wished to entrap them.

While the young men were revolving the question in their minds without gaining the least satisfactory solution, Tom Dayton laid his hand on Charlie's shoulder and whispered:

"Charlie, isn't there some small, dark object swinging to and fro in the open doorway?"

"There is somethin', sure," declared Charlie after a moment's steady gazing. "Basil must have put it there. He's come home and findin' us absent, hung the object there in the open door so's we'd not fail to notice it, and then went away again—maybe, to hunt for us. But if he did put it there, it'll doubtless give us all desired information and directions."

"That may be exactly the case, Charlie, and as we're in for whatever presents itself, the first thing for us to do now is to inquire into the nature of that swingin' object."

Cautiously the youths crept forward step by step until they were close enough to see the swaying object was large as a man's hand, and suspended from the door casing overhead by means of a cord or string.

As it swung to and fro in the wind, Tom Dayton reached out his hand toward it. Swinging toward him it just touched his fingers, but from that touch he recoiled as if it had been the

body of a serpent. It was a hairy something, but he knew not what.

Determined, however, to know the truth he reached up and seizing the cord tore it from its fastening; then carrying it at arm's length, he led the way from the cabin out into the open moonlight on the edge of the prairie.

At the very first glimpse at the object the boys started with a cry of horror, while a shudder convulsed their very souls, for their eyes rested upon a fresh human scalp!

CHAPTER VII.

STARTLING NEWS FROM HICKORY POINT.

"My God!" cried Tom Dayton as he gazed upon the bloody thing he held in his hand; "Charlie, it is the scalp of our friend Blundering Basil! The red demons have killed him, and flaunted this in our faces in mockery, or as a warning!"

"Let us make sure it's Basil's scalp, Tom," said young Burch, and taking the scalp in his hand, they examined the hair as closely as was possible in the hazy moonlight. However, they were not fully satisfied with the examination. That it was not Basil's scalp was to be hoped for rather than expected.

Under the circumstances what were they to do? If Basil was dead, then their course was plain enough—to hasten homeward. But in their doubt and uncertainty they could not think of deserting their friend who might be living and in need of their assistance.

While they stood discussing the matter their ears were greeted by a far-off sound which they soon discovered was made by hooved feet. That horsemen were abroad upon the prairie they had no doubt; and as the sound grew plainer and plainer, they knew they were approaching. But whether the horsemen were friends or foes the young amateurs knew not, so they hastened back into the shadows in front of the cabin to await developments.

The drumming of the hoofs grew nearer and nearer and finally the sound of voices was heard commingled therewith.

Straight up to the door of the cabin the unknown dashed. The boys could see there were two of them. Drawing rein, one of them was heard to say:

"By heavens! doctor, the place seems to be deserted."

Charlie Burch started. The voice sounded familiar to him, and he was about to communicate the fact to Tom when the latter anticipated him by whispering:

"Charlie, sure as death, that's the voice of your brother Fred!"

"That's exactly what I thought," rejoined Charlie.

"Hulloa, in there!" shouted the same voice, and then the boys knew beyond doubt it was the voice of Fred Burch.

"Ho, there," answered Charlie, "is that you, Fred?"

"You bet it is, Charlie," replied his brother, "but what's the matter 'round here?—all so dark and quiet?"

"Brother, I'm glad you've come," replied Charlie, advancing from his covert; "we're in a terrible trouble."

"Yes, so we heard; how's Tom?" was the reply.

"I'm all right, Fred," answered Tom, "but I'm afraid our friend—"

"Why, Tom," interrupted Fred Burch in apparent astonishment, "wasn't you hurt?—shot in the foot?"

"No, sir; who said I had been?"

"Great God, doctor! what can this mean?" exclaimed Fred addressing his companion; then turning to Tom he asked: "Tom, is your sister Jennie and Fanny Moore here?"

"Why, no, Fred, of course not."

"Haven't they been?"

"Not that I know."

"Then, by heavens! there has been some foul work going on!" declared Fred Burch.

"What do you mean, Fred?" Tom asked, betraying some emotion; "what is wrong at the settlement? what about Jennie and Fanny?"

"They have been deceived—decoyed from home, and, God only knows what has been their fate!" answered Fred excitedly.

"Oh, Fred! Fred!" cried Tom, "this cannot be!"

"It's true, Tom—too true! Listen—let me tell you. Early this morning an old man, dressed as a hunter, and claiming to be a hunter from the Big Sioux, and giving the name Seth Hood, came galloping into Hickory Point with the news of your havin' accidentally shot yourself through the foot the day before with a revolver. He told your mother and Jennie you had sent

him for Jennie to come and help take care of you, as it would be weeks before you could walk a step, and—"

"The infernal old liar!" burst from Tom's lips. "But, pardon me, Fred—go on."

"Hood looked honest and talked honest," Fred went on. "No one mistrusted a thing wrong about him. The news almost killed your poor mother, and had she been able she would have undertaken the journey herself. As it was, she hurriedly helped Jennie to arrange herself for the ride, Fanny Moore volunteering to accompany her. Uncle Phil Berry was selected to accompany them, notwithstanding. Seth Hood was going back also. Your mother prepared bandages and some liniments for your wounded foot, and gave them to Hood. To Uncle Phil she consigned some delicate articles of food for you. By Jennie she sent words of motherly love and advice. The four left the settlement, well mounted, about eight o'clock this morning."

"Doctor Deems here was absent at the time, and did not get home until noon, when he and I struck out for here. After the girls had left, the settlers talked the matter over and concluded that you might be worse than was supposed, and I volunteered to escort the doctor here to attend you."

"Great heavens! this is terrible! it will kill poor mother!" groaned the young settler. "And Jennie—poor Jennie! what has been her fate and Fanny's?"

"Let us hope," said Dr. Oliver Deems, in an encouraging tone, "that Uncle Phil Berry will thwart the designs of that old liar, Hood, and save the girls."

"I tell you what, Doc," said Fred Burch, "there is more than old Hood concerned in the conspiracy to abduct Jennie. Uncle Phil is a fearless old man, but he may not mistrust anything wrong until it's too late to set it aright. But, boys, where is Basil?"

"We know not, but are afraid he is either dead or in trouble," replied Charlie; "we've been havin' an awful night of it, doctor!"

"Basil dead?" cried the doctor; "what has been the trouble?"

"The Indians are the cause of it. A large party is in camp up the river. Basil and one of them had trouble to-day about a trap, and the whole gang seems bent upon our destruction. The last we saw of Basil he was in the river, fighting with an Ingin. They fired the prairie after that, and Tom and I had such a narrow escape that we were compelled to throw away our guns and accouterments to save our lives. We reached the lake, and, through the instrumentality of the very Ingin Basil had struck, we were saved from being roasted; but he gave us to understand that hereafter he was our enemy."

"Coming on to the cabin, what should we find hanging in the open doorway but a fresh, human scalp?"

"Great heavens!" burst from the doctor's lips. "We examined it," Charlie went on, "but have been unable to make out whether it was taken from Basil's head or not."

"Bloody murder!" exclaimed Fred Burch; "whose else could it be but Basil's scalp? Can it be that we are to have an Indian uprising?"

"It's been the rumor for some time, that you know, Fred," said Dr. Deems, "that Ishtahaba's band was threatening the northern settlements, and this trouble with Basil may precipitate the outbreak; and when it comes, woe, woe to the weak, unprotected settlers!"

"Poor Blundering Basil! he was a brave, jolly-hearted and strange, eccentric fellow. But, boys, suppose the Indians are on the war-path, what connection can that fact have with the abduction of Jennie and Fanny?"

"I was just thinking," answered Fred, "that this Indian trouble was the source of all our friends' trouble. That man, Seth Hood, is undoubtedly a renegade acting for himself, or a deeper-dyed villain among the Indians—one who has seen Jennie and smitten by her fair face, determined on her abduction."

"That may be true, Fred," Dr. Deems rejoined, "but isn't it very true that whoever the villain is, at the bottom of all those girls' trouble, he knew that Tom Dayton was here, and exactly the kind of a story to tell to get Jennie away? Of course, Fanny's abduction may not have been intended, so the villain's scheme was doubly successful. But, boys, we'd better go into the cabin and strike a light, and if this should prove to be, on close examination, Basil's scalp, we'll know what to depend on so far as he is concerned."

Securing their horses, the party approached the cabin door. The rustling of a pile of dry leaves under his feet suggested an idea to Fred

Burch. Stooping, he took up a handful of the leaves, pressed them into a ball which he lighted with a match. When the ball was well ablaze, he tossed it into the cabin. The light flared up and then went out; but the settlers had been enabled to see there was nothing wrong inside the cabin, and so all entered at once.

Tom Dayton lighted a fire in the fireplace, and then Dr. Deems and Fred examined the scalp. Dr. Deems pronounced the hair Basil's, but Fred Burch did not think so. As he remembered it, Basil's hair was shorter, and of a darker color; and so this difference of opinion left the matter still unsettled. But while it was yet under discussion, the ears of the four caught a sound from the door. All looked up, and with an exclamation of surprise started back. A figure stood in the doorway—the figure of a half-breed Indian. He was a heavy-set, broad-shouldered fellow, with a face deformed by great, hideous scars, and absolutely atrocious in its expression.

The repulsive wretch was dressed in Indian outfit. In his head-dress he wore long, gray eagle-feathers that spread out above his head like a great fan, while to the under side of the fillet, which was made of spotted snake-skin, depended a score or more snake-rattles which gave forth an ominous sound whenever he moved his head.

The most startling thing about the presence of the half-breed, to Tom and Charlie, was in the discovery, that he had in his possession the handsome rifle and accouterments that belonged to Blundering Basil; and in their minds it settled the fate of the young trapper.

"Ugh!" ejaculated the half-breed, as he swelled himself out with an importance calculated to be fear-inspiring, "me war-chief, Broken Face."

"Well, Broken Face, what would you have with us?" asked Dr. Deems, in a friendly tone.

The Indian made no reply, but with a savage leer upon his brutal face, and a flashing of his wolfish eyes, he stepped into the room and was immediately followed by a second, third, fourth and fifth Indian, all of whom quickly aligned themselves alongside their chief, their backs to the wall, their hands upon their tomahawks, and their eyes fixed upon the whites with a malicious gleam that told plainer than words the murderous intentions dominant in their savage hearts!

CHAPTER VIII.

FOUND DYING.

BLUNDERING BASIL had not met the fate his friends had feared. When he had been pounced upon by the ambushed red-skins on the river-bank opposite Mole Cave, it was by his own motion and effort that the conflict was transferred to the river. He saw that the savage who had attacked him was not Running Wolf, but a more powerful warrior; and that his chances with him, backed by a dozen friends, were hopeless unless he could get into the water. Even then he had no assurance of success.

Basil knew the depth of the water at that point and his own skill in that element. So, when, by a desperate effort, he succeeded in dragging his antagonist over the high bank he was prepared for the plunge and the new danger therefrom; but to the red-skin it was unexpected and the fall and the plunge beneath the water took away his breath, and he quickly released his hold on Basil to fight the waves.

But Basil was ready to improve his advantage, and seizing the foe by the scalp-lock, he held his head under the water until he ceased struggling; but all the while the young trapper kept up a violent kicking and floundering in the water to the red-skins on the bank into the belief that an even contest was being maintained, the darkness preventing them from observing the actual state of affairs. In this way Basil gradually transferred the apparent struggle toward the opposite bank, and when assured he could escape those on shore he dove down and swam under the water for some distance. When he arose to the surface it was near the east shore, but he was so completely winded that he was compelled to lie in concealment under some drooping willows until he could regain his strength. He heard and even saw the Indians in the boat searching the waters; and when he saw the craft head for the eastern shore, he crawled from the river and hastened to the dug-out to warn his friends, Tom and Charlie.

But to his surprise he found the boys gone, and thinking they must be somewhere about he concealed himself in the shadows back of the dug-out to await the result of the Indians' visit. But half an hour developed nothing, and now fully satisfied the boys had fled the place, no

doubt, under the impression he was dead, he stole away down the river, having lost all his weapons except his big hunting-knife.

To elude the red-skins he kept back a ways from the shore. He had strong hopes that he might run across his friends, for he naturally supposed they had gone down the stream.

Wading creeks and swimming bayous rather than deviate from a straight course, Basil pushed on until he finally drew up at a point opposite the mouth of Prairie Creek, the outlet of Round Lake.

He was now about five miles from home which was due west. North of Round Lake he saw the whole heavens aglare with light. He knew the prairie was on fire, but he little dreamed of the terrible ordeal his friends, at that very moment, were undergoing on that burning plain.

Without delay the young trapper plunged into the river and swam across. Landing near the mouth of the creek, where the timber was thickest, and the shadows deepest, he struck out for his cabin.

He had gone but a few rods when his ears were assailed by a low groan. He stopped and listened and again heard the sound. It was unlike anything he had ever heard among the strange voices of night. It was a genuine expression of misery, nor was it of bird or beast. It was a human groan freighted with the palsy-chill of death-agony.

Without a thought of danger to himself the young trapper made his way in the direction whence the sound proceeded. His first thought was that it might be one of his boy friends in distress, and not until he had stopped by the prostrate form of the sufferer, lying where the gloom was deepest, and passed his hand over a rough-bearded face, was that thought dispelled.

"Stranger," he said, kneeling beside the prostrate man, "who are you? What's the matter?"

A groan answered him.

"Who are you, stranger?" the young trapper repeated, laying his hand upon the stranger's groping fingers.

"Basil! Basil!" burst from the man's lips, as he nervously clutched the boy's hand, "Basil, is it you I hear?"

Blundering Basil started. He recognized the voice despite its feebleness as that of Uncle Phil Berry.

"Yes, it's me, Uncle Phil," he replied, "but great smokyzoopers! What are you doin' here on your back? What's wrong, Uncle Phil?"

"Basil, I'm done for—oh! my head! my head, Basil!" groaned the old man in half-delirious tones.

Basil passed his hand over the old pioneer's head to soothe the pain. A cry burst from the man's lips as he did so, while Basil started as if from the touch of a serpent, a shudder of horror convulsing his frame. The top of the old man's head was bare and slippery with blood. *He had been scalped!*

Basil said never a word. A chill crept along every fiber of his body. It made him sick at heart. Confused thoughts flashed through his brain. It was several moments before he had recovered his composure sufficiently to inquire:

"Uncle Phil, how come you in this awful plight?"

"The Ingins! the cursed Ingins—oh! my—" Here the old man's voice failed him. His breath came quick and hard. Basil thought he was dying, but in a moment he rallied, and in a low voice said, every word seeming to cause him pain: "yes, the Ingins murdered me. Oh, Basil! Basil!"

"Uncle Phil, can't I do somethin' for you?" the boy asked.

Again the old man was silent, but presently he fairly shouted in a wild, incoherent manner:

"Run, Basil, run! don't let them hurt the girls!—stand back! stand back there, red-skin! don't harm them girls!—is this treachery?—stop! stop!—mercy, Broken Face, mercy!"

Again the old man's voice gave out. He was delirious, and almost in his last agonies.

"Uncle Phil, did the half-breed, Broken Face, hurt you?" Basil asked; "what girls do you mean, uncle?"

The old man made an effort as if to reply, but he could not speak. There was a convulsive quivering of his body, a rigid drawing of the limbs, a rattling in the throat, followed by a relaxing of the muscles, and then Blundering Basil knew that Uncle Phil was dead, and that the secret of the dark crime that had led to his death had died with him.

For several minutes the young trapper sat in deep thought by the side of the dead man. He repeated over and over in his mind the dying words of the old settler, but they were so dis-

connected that the only thing certain he could make out was that the half-breed chief, Broken Face, had scalped him, and no doubt left him for dead. But who the "girls" were in whose behalf the old man had made such a piteous appeal, he could not imagine.

The howl of a wolf not far away finally reminded the young trapper that he owed a duty to the dead—that the body of his old friend must be secured against mutilation by the beasts of prey. But the only sepulcher he could give it was beneath the placid waters of the creek, at least, for the present. So he lifted the body and carried it to the stream and weighted it down with water-soaked drift-logs under the water.

Then he turned away and resumed his journey westward. As he swallowed the great lump that for some time had been half-choking him, the dying words of the old man were set ringing in his ears again, and then the hideous face of his destroyer, Broken Face, arose before his mental vision in all its fiendish atrocity.

With these things working on Basil's mind his feelings underwent a change. The blood began to flow in heated currents through his veins; the latent energies of his brain were aroused, and every function of his physical being responded to the call of a mental resolve.

Thus in a few minutes this eccentric youth underwent a transformation. His very soul was aroused by the brutal murder of the good old man, and in his heart of hearts he registered a solemn vow to give his life, if need be, in avenging the death of Philip Berry.

CHAPTER IX.

A TERRIBLE TRAGEDY.

As the six savages confronted Dr. Deems, Tom Dayton, and the Burch brothers in Blundering Basil's cabin, the settlers quickly realized their peril. The sight of the scalp they had just been examining, the malignant expression upon the red-skins' paint and dirt-bedaubed faces, the possession of Basil's rifle by the feather-bedecked half-breed, all told, beyond question, that the Indians were on the war-path.

To the settlers the hideously deformed face of the half-breed, Broken Face, was well known. He had been at the settlement several times within the past two years and had received kind treatment from all.

Quickly realizing the situation, Dr. Deems knew that they must act promptly and fearlessly. The doctor was a man of five-and-thirty years, of slight build, yet strong and courageous as a lion.

Fred Burch was a man of five-and-twenty, of large frame, with a clear gray eye and open, pleasant countenance. He and Deems had each a rifle and a pair of revolvers; but Tom and Charlie were without a weapon, and they knew that any attempt to arm themselves from the belts of their friends might precipitate a conflict. However, they soon made up their minds as to the course they would take should an attack be made upon them.

Seeing the red-skins hesitated to open the conflict after getting themselves into position, Dr. Deems conceived a hope that bloodshed might be averted awhile at least, by engaging them in a parley; and in what he might have the opportunity of saying to the savages, he also wished to convey, by implication, to his friends, the course they must all pursue should the worst come.

All this flashed through the doctor's quick brain in a few seconds, and with a presence devoid of the least sign of fear, and in a voice cool and calm, he said:

"Well, Broken Face, how do you do so, sir?"

"How?" was the laconic reply of the half-breed, given in a tone, and with a look, that did not in the least conceal the malicious intent burning in his heart.

"It's been a long time since I've seen you, Broken Face," Deems again remarked; "you hav'n't been at Hickory Point lately; but, say, Broken Face, won't you and your warriors be seated? Sit down and rest yourselves."

"No," retorted the chief shortly, "the Sioux will not sit down in the wigwam of his enemies."

"Enemies?" exclaimed Deems, "we are not enemies; we are friends. Why should we be enemies?"

"White-Face Bull, the trapper who lives here, struck one of my warriors and killed another. We have come for him. Let the pale-faces give him to us if they are our friends."

"I presume you have reference to Blundering Basil?" Deems said.

"Yes," answered Broken Face.

"Basil is not here."

The chief glanced around the room and up at the loft in a manner that implied a disbelief in the doctor's words.

"Then one of your pale-faces must go in his place," was the half-breed's reply.

"But none of us have harmed you or any of your warriors."

"The warrior White-Face Bull killed had done him no harm. The life of a pale-face must be given for that of the Indian."

"Broken Face, that is a wrong idea of justice. If Blundering Basil has done you a wrong, he's the one to answer for it, and not one of us."

"It's Ingins idea of justice, anyhow," was the response. "We take one of you pale-faces—keep him five suns. When his friends bring the White-Face Bull to Ingins camp, then let you go. If White-Face Bull not come in five suns, then you die."

"Oh, I understand," Deems said; "you want to hold one of us to answer for Basil; but what assurance have we that you hav'n't already killed him? I see you have his rifle, and yonder is a scalp your warriors must have taken."

"Not White-Face Bull's—wish 'm was," and the chief gave a furtive glance at the scalp.

"Then," continued the doctor, "if it's not Basil's scalp, it is the scalp of some friend of ours. Now, are you willing to turn over one of your warriors to us to kill for the friend of ours your Indians killed and scalped?"

"No," snapped the chief.

"Why not do as you want us to do?"

"Don't have to. You don't know that Ingins killed your friend and scalp 'm," was the important response.

"Well," spoke up Tom Dayton, "if you haven't killed our friend Basil, and we'll wait, he'll come in soon."

"Ugh!" grunted the chief, with a contemptuous sneer, "pale-face boy cunnin' as the fox. Broken Face no git caught in trap like the beaver—no wait on white trapper—he not come, but hide away like the wolf."

"Then you insist on taking one of us away to your camp *alive*, do you?" demanded Doctor Deems.

"Want one alive—that do?"

"Which of us do you prefer?"

"You guess'm."

The doctor could scarcely repress a smile despite the gravity of the situation.

"Suppose I refuse to go?" he said.

"S'pose take you, then."

"Well, now look here, Broken Face, we don't want any trouble with you Ingins, but we are all brave men, and know how to fight. Suppose, *as will be the case*, at the first move you make to carry out your threat, four revolvers blaze into your face, and four of you fall dead, what will you gain even though the other two kill us all?"

These words, or else his failure to imbue the whites with an evident sense of fear, seemed to irritate the chief. He straightened up and gazed at the doctor with glowering eyes. The breeze, drifting in through the open window by which he stood, swayed the feathers in his head-dress and shook the snake-rattles about his head, until the sight and sound seemed to bring out in bolder relief, the repulsiveness and incarnate devilry of the fellow's face and heart.

There were a few moments of dead silence, when the chief seeing he could not intimidate the whites, spoke a few words to a warrior who turned and closed the cabin door.

Full well the settlers knew the meaning of this movement.

"Now then," said Broken Face, his hand dropping to his tomahawk, a fierce light gleaming in his eyes, "let the pale-faces decide without more big talk. One must go alive, or the scalps of four will—"

He did not finish the sentence. Something flashed in at the little window against which he stood and encircled his throat. Quick as a flash his head was jerked backward and downward through the window until the broad shoulders lay upon the sill. He was heard to utter a groan, followed by a gasp, and a horrible gurgling cry. The great chest was seen to swell as if to burst; his arms beat the air frantically. But only for an instant was the savage held thus when the body straightened up with a convulsive spring and staggered forward, the head gone from the shoulders, the red blood spurting from the severed arteries of the neck to the ceiling, and fell a quivering mass upon the floor!

CHAPTER X.

UNCLE PHIL AVENGED.

DR. DEEMS and his friends shrunk back with horror at sight of the ghastly spectacle that was so suddenly presented before them; while the

Blundering Basil.

red-skins fairly quivered with superstitious terror, and forgetting their mission there—with no other thought now but that of escaping death at the hands of the silent and invisible slayer of their chief, they threw open the door and fled from the cabin. As they lunged out into the darkness, a cry of mortal agony was heard to escape the lips of one of them; and full well the settlers knew its meaning—that the silent avenger was still at his dreadful work.

Before the four astonished borderers had spoken a single word—before they could fully comprehend what had actually taken place, so silent, so swift, so terrible had been the tragedy enacted—the figure of a man with hatless head, a long knife in his hand, bounded into the cabin with a frenzied yell of triumph.

"Blundering Basil! Blundering Basil!" burst from the lips of Tom and Charlie.

And so it was.

Tom Dayton advanced to greet his young friend, but stopped short, and started back. He saw the face of the young trapper was pallid and wore a strange, fixed expression, while in his eyes burned that wild, desperate, consuming fire of a madman!

Quickly the young avenger glanced about the room, and from one to the other of his friends, the look upon his face and in his eyes sending a shudder through their breasts.

At sight of him Doctor Deems turned to Fred Burch and said in an undertone:

"He's stark mad—a raving maniac!"

He had scarcely spoken when Basil, pointing to the lifeless body of Broken Face, said in a tone that at once led the doctor to reverse his decision:

"Friends, didn't that Ingin make a terrible blunder when he run ag'inst the edge of my knife? Curse him! he murdered and scalped Uncle Phil Berry; but, doc.or, how did you and Fred escape?"

He spoke in his natural tone, and the sound of his own voice seemed to dispel that wild look from his face and eyes, and subdue the fierce, white heat burning in his breast. Once more had he become Blundering Basil.

"Basil," replied Fred Burch, "what do you mean about our escape, and Uncle Phil's murder?"

"Wasn't you and Doc with Uncle Phil?" queried Basil.

"No."

"I found Uncle Phil dyin' in the woods five miles from here. He made me understand that Broken Face had murdered him, and tried to tell me somethin' about girls, but he died with the story unfinished. What girls did he mean, Fred? Your presence here, and Uncle Phil's vonder, tell me somethin' has gone wrong at Hickory Point.

Fred Burch briefly related the story of Seth Hood's coming to the settlement with a falsehood on his lips, the departure of Jennie, Fanny, and Uncle Phil with him for Round Lake.

"Then Jennie and Fanny are in the hands of the Ingins!" Basil declared, that strange light beginning to burn in his eyes again.

"Yes," responded Dr. Deems, "the finding of Berry's body settles beyond dispute the fact that those girls have been decoyed from home, and into the power of enemies. But who is the arch-conspirator? I cannot think Old Hood was anything else than a hired tool. He had never been at the settlement before, and could have known nothing of Jennie. So it is clear to my mind that the chief villain in this crime not only knew Jennie, but knew that Tom, her brother, was here with you. Now, who could that scoundrel be?"

"How'd Jack Arp fill the bill?" asked Basil.

"Never!" exclaimed Dr. Deems, who had been a warm friend and backer of the Wapsie hunter while at the Point.

"Then," calmly answered Basil, "there must be some one at the settlement that is actin' with the Ingins and white renegades."

Tom Dayton paced the cabin in an agony of grief. To him Jennie seemed lost forever, and the news he must carry to his poor distracted mother would drive her mad if not into the grave.

"Bear it bravely as you can, Tom," Basil said; "we'll foller them Ingins like a witherin', blightin' curse be the girls dead or alive. Rest assured Blunderin' Basil 'll not go into any 'stoopids,' until he has blundered across the path o' them villains, and rescued the girls, if they be alive. The work's already begun, and that wretch there is my first victim. Outside the door lies another with a punctured lung. Oh, I'm awake, boys! I'm out and around! After I buried Uncle Phil in the creek, a demon awoke within me that I never knew I possessed;

and, as he's a royal smokyzooper, I'm goin' to let him have his way for awhile. It may not be altogether agreeable to the rest of you folks, but rest assured our enemies 'll find it frightfully frigid if my pet demon has half a chance. That Broken Face is a sample of our first work. Heavens! it seemed I'd the strength and fary to have tore him limb from limb! But I see the ugly varmint has brought home my own Goliath—my rifle, and outfit. Well, one good turn deserves another, and I propose to give the old sinner's carcass burial in—the stomach o' the kiyotes already beggin' for it out around the grove."

The body of the half-breed, as well as all evidence of the terrible tragedy, were removed from the cabin. Then Fred Burch was put on guard outside, and Basil, assisted by Tom, proceeded to prepare supper for all. This required but a short time, and as soon as the meal was over with Basil said:

"Now boys, I'm goin'."

"Where to-night, Basil?"

"To the Ingin town fifteen miles north o' here. Who of you will go along?"

Every man quickly volunteered to go. Basil reflected a moment then said:

"The people at Hickory Point should be put on their guard 'g'inst this Ingin uprisin'. Besides, we may need help to rescue the girls."

"Then I'd better return to the Point," said Dr. Deems; "I have a very sick patient there I promised to see to-morrow."

"All right, doctor," said Basil. "If you come back, or send any one, let this cabin be the point of meeting. If we are not here when you come, don't wait on us but push on north. You'll be apt to find us up that way terribly dead, or deadly terrible. It may be that Tom, and Fred, and Charlie, have got a demon in their breasts that can be got aroused—out and around; and if so, oh! great smokyzoopers! what a pestilence 'll strike that red dog-town of Old Ishtahaba."

With a full understanding as to the future, and the exigencies that might arise, Dr. Deems took his departure for Hickory Point; while Blundering Basil, Tom Dayton and the two Burchs started off toward the Indian encampment.

Tom and Charlie had recovered from the effects of their night's experience with the prairie-fire, and moved away with steps sprightly as ever.

Tom carried Dr. Deems's rifle and a full supply of ammunition. Charlie had been provided with a big navy revolver. In addition to his rifle and hunting-knife, Blundering Basil had appropriated Broken Face's tomahawk, and so all were fairly well armed.

Over the now black prairie they made their way with unflagging footsteps. The moon went down and the darkness deepened.

Just as a light that marked the location of the Indian village came into view, the morning star drifted up out of the dusk of the eastern horizon proclaiming the near approach of day.

"Too late, boys, to reconnoiter that flea-nest to-night," Basil said. "We'll have to wait until to-morrow night."

This was a sore disappointment to Tom Dayton, but he knew that Basil was right.

The four bore away toward the river and secreted themselves in a dense thicket of hazel and plum bushes. There they spent the following day, sleeping and watching by turns. They had brought with them a supply of jerked venison for food, so that, as soon as night again set in, they were not deterred by the weakness of hunger from the work that was before them.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FATE OF JENNIE AND FANNY.

NOT once during their thirty miles' ride did Jennie or Fanny, or even Uncle Phil Berry, mistrust that they were being decoyed from home and friends by a cruel falsehood. Their only thoughts were of reaching the trapper's cabin and alleviating, by words and ministrations, the suffering of the wounded boy.

Being accustomed to horseback riding the girls were enabled to ride along at a goodly speed without becoming fatigued. Their course lay, for the most part, along the river. At noon they halted just long enough to water their animals, eating a lunch themselves as they rode along.

The sun was about an hour high when Uncle Phil who had been to Basil's cabin before, pointed out the tree-tops off to the northwest that marked the end of their journey. They were about six or eight miles away.

Finally they reached Prairie Creek, and were bearing west through the heavy timber, when

a dozen Indians rose up before and around them with the silence of phantoms—as if conjured up from the very earth. Not a word escaped their lips as they glided forward and seized each of the horses by the bits.

Seth Hood made a show of desperate resistance, but was soon out of his saddle lying prostrate on the ground.

Uncle Phil Berry, heroic old man, leaped from his horse and lit into the red-skins with fist and foot, and noble blows he dealt the cunning foe.

The girls were almost stricken dumb with terror by the sudden assault. Like one in a trance they saw the moving figures around them, heard the blows of the combatants, and the trampling of the horses' feet; and finally, when their numbed senses had recovered from the terrible shock they had sustained, they found that the Indians had become their escort, and that they were being conducted away toward the north along the river. They discovered, also, that Uncle Phil was not with them, and that Seth Hood, riding some distance in advance, was in charge of a savage who was riding Berry's horse.

The maidens were still ignorant of the fact that they were decoyed from home by falsehood, and at length, when their course brought them to the edge of the prairie, and Jennie looking back saw the little grove pointed out as the location of Basil's cabin falling far behind, she burst into tears, and in tones of bitter anguish cried out:

"Oh, my poor brother! my poor mother! may God help them!"

The savages were unmoved by her grief. Among them were two or three whom Jennie recognized as having been at Hickory Point; but they were stoical and indifferent and without authority, else the maiden would have appealed to them upon the grounds of the kind treatment they had received at the settlement.

The sun went down and found them still in the saddle. Night closed around them and brought such a deathlike gloom to the hearts of the girls that the thump of their horses' feet sounded as if they were clods falling upon their own coffins.

Finally the twinkling of many lights before them told that they were approaching the Indian encampment, and when they rode into the place a few minutes later all hope was left behind.

The Indian village was not a large one. In fact it was but a temporary encampment of Ishtahaba's band of Sioux, who, with their squaws and papposes, had come down from the north to hunt and trap a few weeks.

All told there were about fifty lodges or *tepees*, pitched in a circle and facing a common center. This center, which was an open area of an acre in extent, was aglow with a huge bonfire which furnished light to all the surrounding lodges. A number of smaller fires, however, by which supper was being cooked, burned close in front of the lodges.

The lodge of the chief, Ishtahaba—Young Sleepy Eyes—was quite conspicuous in the circle by its pretentious size.

When the party entered the camp the bucks were sitting or lying around the big fire in the opening; the squaws were busy preparing supper and cutting up the game of the day's hunt for curing. Naked, dirty children, and lean, wolfish dogs were chasing each other in play, and rolling and tumbling in the dirt in all the sweet abandon of juvenile, savage life. But all this was changed in a moment when the party with the captives entered the camp. There was a general rush to see the pale-face girls, and for awhile all was excitement and disorder.

The girls were taken from their saddles and conducted to an unoccupied lodge which seemed to have been made ready in anticipation of their coming. They were given in charge of a big, raw-boned and masculine-looking squaw who at once closed the entrance to the *tepee* to spare the timid, grief-stricken girls the sight of the curious and vulgar throng hanging around outside.

At first the maidens shrunk with fear from the red giantess, but she soon convinced them they had nothing to fear from her, and gradually won their confidence. Then she brought them water in a basin and they bathed their hands and face. After this she fetched them some nicely-broiled venison and some bread, of which they ate sparingly. They had no appetite. The unknown fate that awaited them kept their young hearts convulsed with fear.

Finally, Old Soutah, as their guard and attendant had called herself, made them a couch and told them to lie down and rest and sleep.

The girls finally threw themselves on the

couch, but not to sleep. Soutah laid down by them.

The hours wore away painfully slow. To the poor, sleepless captives, it seemed day would never come.

Along in the night they were startled by a wild commotion among the warriors outside. Soutah arose and went out. Presently she returned, a sullen, foreboding look upon her broad, angular face.

"What's the matter, Soutah?" Jennie ventured to inquire.

"The friends of the pale-faces have slain Broken Face and one of his warriors," the giantess answered, eying them sharply as if to see the effect the news would have upon them.

But the captives could not regard the news as favorable to them, but rather increased their fears.

Until broad daylight the Indians kept up a commotion in the village, and so the captives did not attempt to lie down again.

Old Soutah brought them their breakfast, and, after they had eaten, she led them from the tepee and walked with them under the trees in the rear of the tents until their aching bodies and cramped limbs had regained their strength and circulation.

Shortly after returning to their prison-lodge, two young warriors, wearing the insignia of war-chiefs, came to the door and looked in upon them with covetous, leering faces. This they repeated a dozen times during the day, and their conduct filled the hearts of the girls with a horrible fear.

The day wore away and night again set in. A great bonfire was again built in the open court or circle.

To the girls it soon became plain that the Indians were going to have another night of demonstration. Soutah informed them there was to be a war-dance, and that on the morrow the braves would go forth to avenge the death of Broken Face and his warriors.

Along about ten o'clock Soutah left the Prison Lodge, closing the door behind her.

"Oh, Fanny!" exclaimed Jennie, "what is to become of us?"

"God only knows," answered Fanny; "but let us continue our trust in Him who doeth all things well. He will save us, Jennie."

"Poor Uncle Phil!" Jennie almost sobbed, "there is no doubt he was killed, and the old hunter, Seth Hood, brought here a captive to be tortured to death."

Thus the girls talked over their troubles for several minutes. In the mean time they heard the savages in the opening yelling, singing and howling like demons, but they durst not look out through fear of witnessing some horrible sight.

It was not entirely dark in the tent. The captives could easily distinguish each other's features. Bars of light from the big fire in the opening found their way into the place through holes and cracks in front of the tepee, filling the prison with a soft twilight.

In the midst of their whispered conversation, the ears of the captives were greeted by a gentle tapping on the side of their lodge. At first they thought it was a twig of the overhanging tree blowing against it, but when they finally located the sound at the rear of their prison, they became more interested, and listened with bated breath.

Presently the sound was repeated, and then they heard a low, admonishing "hist!"

The hearts of the captives leaped into their throats. A friend was come to their rescue. Of this they had no doubt, and mentally prayed that old Soutah might not return until they had communicated with that friend. They sat motionless with their eyes fixed upon the side of the tent. They saw a knife-blade pushed through the wall and move slowly downward cutting a slit therein. A moment later the edges of this slit were pulled apart, and a face inserted into the opening. At the first sight, the captives recognized it. *It was the face of Jack Arp, the Wapsie hunter!*

CHAPTER XII.

JACK ARP TO THE RESCUE.

A LITTLE cry of surprise involuntarily burst from the maidens' lips at sight of the face of the Wapsie hunter.

"Hist, girls!" the man cautioned in a low tone; "for God's sake, don't make a noise or all will be lost! I'm here to rescue you from these savages' power. They are in a great rage over something, and it would be death for me should I be discovered. They're preparing for a war-dance or scalp-dance, I don't know which, and when their attention is all given to their hoodoo,

I expect to effect your release. Your horses are tethered out on the prairie, and we will secure them on which to flee. My old friend, Sid Bush, is in waitin' out in the woods to help us. Be of good cheer, and nerve yourselves for the ordeal of flight. I may be back soon, and it may not be for an hour. We want to get the horses ready first, then when the war-dance is on at full tide, I'll come for you. Remember that silence, caution, and nerve will be required if we'd succeed. The Ingins are wary. Make no other arrangements except to prepare your minds for the flight, or the red-skins may suspect your purpose. It is well, however, to know exactly where to put your hands on your shawls and hats when I call. Till then, good-by."

Jennie would have spoken to him but before she had the chance he was gone. She longed to inquire about her brother, for she thought Jack must know something about him.

"Jennie," whispered Fanny, in the faith of an earnest and devout Christian, "our prayers are about to be answered. Oh! how good and merciful is God!"

"But, how mysterious his ways, Fanny," replied the other: "He sends Jack Arp to save us, and the hunter comes in all kindness after his humiliating defeat by Basil, and after I had rejected his attentions to me. Fanny, it seems like a rebuke, doesn't it?"

"It shows he holds no ill-feeling toward you," answered Fanny; "and it is the only course one possessed of manly courage and gallantry could pursue, if in the end he would win the victory. However, if he—'Sh! Soutah!'"

At this juncture Soutah and a warrior entered the lodge, the latter carrying several thongs of deerskin in his hands.

"Omasebaha and Lekonsah, the young chiefs whose wives the captives are to be, bids me bind you," the giantess said. "When the war-dance is over, then will I release you."

So saying, and, assisted by the buck, she tied the captives' hands at their backs and their ankles together. This done, they lashed one girl to the other in such a position that neither could rise, drawing the cords so tightly around them that they almost cut into the tender flesh.

Having thus secured their captives, the squaw and warrior left, permitting the lodge door to remain wide open.

A little after their departure, Omasebaha and Lekonsah, the young chiefs who had so often obtruded their hateful presence on them during the day, came to the door of the tent and looked in upon them, then went away.

"Jennie," said Fanny, as the chiefs disappeared, "we now know the fate that is to be ours if we remain here."

"Yes; and I prefer death ten thousand times!" declared Jennie. "Oh, my God! deliver us from this!"

"I wonder why they bound us? Surely, they have not mistrusted anything," observed Fanny, thoughtfully.

Through the open door the maidens could see the savages engaged in their war-dance, and a wild and frantic demonstration it was, in which the women and children even took an active part. They could see the tall figure of Old Soutah among them, but at no time did she forget herself in the wild performance so far as not to cast an occasional glance toward the captives' lodge.

Nearly an hour had passed, when the giantess came and looked in upon the girls, then went back to the nocturnal revel.

A low tapping at the rear of the lodge suddenly caused the captives' hearts to almost cease beating. They turned their eyes, half in dread, toward the point whence the sound proceeded. In the opening previously made they saw the face of Jack Arp!

"Come, quick!" he whispered.

"We cannot—we are bound hand and foot," Jennie replied.

Quickly the knife of the hunter admitted him to the lodge, and as quickly he severed the captives' bonds.

The next minute the three stood together in the shadows outside the lodge.

Taking each of the maidens by a hand the young hunter led them slowly, cautiously back into the woods. Not a word was spoken for half an hour—until they came to where Sidney Bush stood waiting with four horses ready for the flight. Then Arp said:

"Now, gals, so fur, so good. We'll take to the saddle and then let the red varmints catch us if they can."

Hastily mounting the four rode away up the river, Arp at Jennie's side, Bush at Fanny's. When a mile from the Indian camp, Jack said aloud:

"Now, then, we can breathe a full, long breath, Miss Jennie, for we're out of all immediate danger."

"Thank the Lord!" exclaimed Jennie most fervently, joyfully; "and to you, Mr. Arp, we owe our deliverance. You have run great risk to rescue us, and I fear we may never be able to repay your kindness."

"Don't trouble yourself 'bout that, Miss Dayton; what I done was from a sense of duty and not through hope o' any more reward than I've already got, and that's your 'preciation."

"You are a true borderman, Jack, in every sense of the word," Jennie declared in frank earnestness.

"Thanks, Miss Jennie; I'm glad *you* think so, for it war less'n a week ago that reflections were cast onto me at Hickory Point."

He said this in a tone slightly tinged with bitterness, and Jennie felt that it was intended as a gentle rebuke for her coolness toward him when at the settlement; but she did not like the man then, and even now, while she admired his fearless courage, and felt most grateful for his kindness to her and Fanny, she had no reason to change her feelings toward him. It placed her in a peculiar and trying situation. The hunter had sought to pay her attentions when at the Point, and she had refused to accept them. He told her then she might some time regret her coldness, and he seemed eager to remind her of the fact by implication.

The course of the fugitives was due north. Of this the maidens were aware, and as their rescuers held to this course mile after mile without deviation, Jennie was finally induced to ask:

"Jack, how far north will we have to go before we change our course so as to reach friends' home?"

"Sid and I," replied Arp, "decided it would be best to keep north till we reached Snake Creek, then make for the Spirit Lake settlements, and from there swing 'round to Hickory Point. Our object in this was to throw the Ingins off our trail. As soon as you are missed they'll naterally s'pose you would take the course leadin' home and rush off in hot haste that way. I do not intend they shall track us this way for right now I'm goin' to fire the prairie behind us."

As he thus spoke he drew rein, ignited a match and applied it to the dry grass, leaning over in his stirrups to do so, and then rode on.

The wind blowing in their faces swept the fire southward, and soon the whole plain behind them was ablaze with roaring flames.

As they rode on and Jennie began to realize that every step carried her further and further from home, she began to question in her mind, the judgment of her rescuer in taking the course he did. To her it seemed that they could have escaped the Indians as well going south as north, with the start they had. But it was too late now to change their course, even could she have convinced Arp of what to her seemed a mistake, and so she prudently kept her thoughts to herself. But her mind reverting to her brother, she asked:

"Mr. Arp, have you heard or seen anything of brother Tom who is a guest at Blundering Basil's cabin?"

"Nothing," responded Arp; "but I've been mistrustin' all along the boys have been amusin' themselves killin' some of them Ingins. If so, it may go hard with them, for the Ingins have an inborn hatred of that Blundering Basil."

Jennie saw by the way Arp spoke of Basil that he had not forgotten his defeat by the young trapper, and refrained from mentioning his name again.

Singular as it may seem, they had been three hours together before Arp asked Jennie as to how she and Fanny came to be in the Indians' power. The maiden gave him the full particulars, but she had not failed to note his indifference to the facts so long.

They rode on at a walk and just at daybreak they reached the mouth of Snake Creek. Here they halted to rest and breakfast. The horses were tied out at grass some ten rods away.

At this point there was quite a grove of scattering timber on both sides of the river. Under a large cottonwood the party seated themselves on the carpet of brown leaves. The hunters divided their food with the girls, and after all had refreshed themselves, Arp and Bush left the girls and went out to bring in the horses to resume their journey. As they approached the animals they saw all four were lying down—stretched out in the grass.

Without a thought other than that the faithful beasts were resting their tired limbs, the two men approached them, only to start back with a

look of dumb horror and amazement upon their faces. *Every horse was stone dead, its throat cut from ear to ear!*

CHAPTER XIII.

BASIL MAKES A RECONNOISSANCE.

AS soon as night had fully set in Blundering Basil and his three companions left their hiding-place and moved away in the direction of Ishtahaba's camp.

When they had reached a point not far from it, Basil left his friends and crept forward to make a reconnoissance. It was a new experience for the young trapper, yet he instinctively went about it with the caution of an old scout and Indian-fighter. He could hear the savages in some kind of a wild demonstration, and consequently thought it very probable that they might not be overly cautious in guarding their camp.

In this he found he was right, for he not only approached within sight of camp unchallenged, but crept so close that he was enabled to locate Ishtahaba's lodge in the circle of tepees. This emboldened him, and he determined to see inside of the chief's tent if such a thing were possible. He did not expect to find the maidens there, but he hoped to obtain some information in regard to them.

Ishtahaba's quarters were located under the spreading branches of an oak tree. Basil saw that by falling back into the woods and approaching from the north he would run less risk in gaining the rear of the lodge than by advancing from his present position. So he quickly made the *detour*, and in less than half an hour he was creeping on all-fours through the shadows toward the chief's tent. No serpent ever moved more noiselessly, and at length he reached the rear of the royal house undiscovered.

Ishtahaba's quarters were more commodious than his neighbors'. In fact, his lodge was an old wall tent, patched over in a hundred places with skins and pieces of blankets, and thrice the size of any one of the conical structures on either side of it.

Lying down upon the ground close against the tent, Basil heard the sound of voices within, and soon discovered that a conversation was being carried on therein between a white man and an Indian. That the latter was the chief, Ishtahaba, he had not a doubt, but who could his white companion be? To the young scout his voice sounded vaguely familiar. He was very sure he had heard it before, but when and where he could not recall.

As the youth could not get a glimpse into the lodge, he was compelled to trust wholly to his ears for the information he sought. But the two talked so low that he could not make out a single word spoken, and he had begun to despair of success when there was a movement of feet in the lodge, and then the white man, who seemed to be on the eve of departure, was heard to say:

"I'll go at once, and try it, chief, and return in half an hour."

Basil started, a cry of surprise almost escaping his lips. He not only heard the words, but was sure he recognized the voice that uttered them, and in an instant the hot blood was coursing through his veins, and his brain throbbing wildly, madly with the thoughts that arose therein.

If he could trust the evidence of his own hearing, then he could clearly see the "power behind the throne" in the abduction of Jennie and Fanny, and the death of Uncle Phil Berry, as well as the trouble he and his friends had encountered.

Remaining quiet the young scout revolved the matter over and over in his mind, and finally concluded that he must be wrong. He hoped so, at least.

From where he lay he could hear the yelling and singing of the red-skins in the opening, yet he was not sufficiently versed in Indian ways to understand its meaning.

After all had become quiet in the chief's lodge, the youth concluded to change his position. In doing so he discovered a small hole in the side of the tent that enabled him to see inside the structure. He saw the chief standing in the doorway watching the performance of his followers around the fire with evident satisfaction. He had remained thus a short time when he was approached by two young chiefs, Omasebaha and Lekonsah. Together the three entered the lodge and seated themselves on the ground, when Lekonsah asked, every word being quite audible to the listener outside:

"Has Ishtahaba made up his mind that Omasebaha and Lekonsah can have the white captives?"

"Ishtahaba," the chief replied, "would be fair with the pale-face, Sure Shot, for he has been the friend of Ishtahaba and of his people. Ishtahaba sent Broken Face and his warriors to help the Sure Shot secure the white maidens. They are now in the Sioux camp, and Ishtahaba does not want to be false to the pale-faces, and take the white girls from them."

"Then Ishtahaba thinks more of the pale-faces than of his young chiefs," declared Omasebaha petulantly.

"No—not of the pale-face, but of his honor," replied the chief.

"Let Ishtahaba listen," exclaimed Lekonsah, his voice pitched in a high key, his face the picture of savage determination: "we respect our chief; we will follow him where he leads, but the maidens shall be the wives of Omasebaha and Lekonsah!"

The chief was silent. To Basil it was evident that trouble was brewing between him and two of his unruly young lieutenants about two white captives, whom the scout had no doubt were Jennie and Fanny.

It was well known that Ishtahaba's band of Indians was made up of seceders from various Northwestern tribes. The chief himself, and a party of personal followers, were an offshoot of the Sisitons Sioux, that formed a nucleus around which Broken Face, with a band of half-breed cut-throats from the North, Omasebaha and Lekonsah, with a number of impulsive young warriors from the Sac and Fox tribes, and one Red Wing, with a few dozen bucks from among the Pottawatomies, gathered and formed an independent band. But Ishtahaba had proven himself a weak man. He was too slow and methodic for the impulsive young rebel chiefs under him, and upon more than one occasion these lieutenants had threatened open rebellion.

To his followers it was clear that the chief was almost wholly in the power of the cunning white man, Sure Shot; and, while the latter had been highly respected for his many fine qualities as an unscrupulous renegade, and had always had his own sweet way with the chief, Omasebaha and Lekonsah concluded to draw the line at the captives, and possess them in spite of the chief and his white friend.

Basil regarded the situation with no little concern. He knew not what the threatened rupture between the chief and his young lieutenants might result in to the captives.

Finally, Omasebaha and Lekonsah left the tent, returned to the fire and joined in the revels of their friends.

Ishtahaba seated himself in his lodge in moody silence. Presently he was joined by a white man, dressed in the garb of a borderman, who thus addressed the chief:

"It's all right, chief. I see they mistrust nothin'."

Basil started, not only at the sound of the voice, but at sight of the face. The suspicion, previously created in his mind by the sound of a voice indistinctly heard, he found had been well grounded. The man was Jack Arp, the Wapsipinnicon hunter!

CHAPTER XIV.

OFF IN PURSUIT.

To Blundering Basil many facts were revealed upon the startling discovery of Jack Arp in Ishtahaba's lodge. It proved that he was "Sure Shot," and an old-time friend of the chief; therefore, a renegade. It also settled the fact that Arp was the abductor of Jennie Dayton and Fanny Moore, the direct cause of Uncle Phil Berry's death, and all the trouble that followed.

His discovery aroused the very demon of revenge within him. The hot blood swept through his veins, and his temples throbbed like the beating of his heart. It was all he could do to restrain himself from some act of violence; but his better judgment prevailed, and he gave ear to the words that now passed between the chief and the renegade.

"Well," said Arp, as he entered the lodge, "I have talked to the maidens from the rear of their tent. I told them I would rescue them. They do not mistrust I am the friend of the Indians."

"Then," replied the chief morosely, "you must not delay long. My young chiefs are rebellious. Since you were here they came into my tent. They declared the white maidens should be theirs. I will have no power to restrain them: now that my true friend, Broken Face, is dead. But I do not want the white maidens in my camp. It will bring the soldiers upon my band and all will be slain. Let Sure Shot act at once. Soon the war-dance will be at its height, then let Sure Shot take the maidens

and flee; but let no one see you—be careful—cunning."

"I'll do that, chief," Arp was heard to respond: "I will take the maidens and flee northward to Snake Creek, and then strike for our old village. I will burn the prairie behind to conceal our trail. When the maidens are missing, Omasebaha and Lekonsah will lead the pursuit toward the settlement. By the time you return to your old village in the North, the captive with the blue eyes will be my wife. She will look upon me with great favor when I rescue her from the Indians' power. I will be a hero, and she will love me, and be my wife; and then Lekonsah dare not trespass."

"Waugh!" ejaculated the chief with a grim smile, "the Sure Shot is cunning as the fox. He makes love by rescuing his own captives."

"The old, red fool!" thought Basil: "he'll not think it so cunning when he finds the great Sure Shot has horn-swoggled him into a job that'll cost him his old carcass. He'll be worse deceived than them girls before he's through with this thing. The old idiot! he's afraid of his own chiefs, and of the soldiers, and is as completely in that varmint Arp's power as to be pliant as mud. But it's all right; I want the great, love-makin' rescuer to deceive the gals as he perposes; but the Lord willin', I'll get in my work on him!"

The young trapper-scout listened to the two villains' conversation for several minutes, filling in the occasional pauses with mental observations which, if they had been bullets or bludgeons, would have left little even of the carcass of Jack Arp. Finally, when he saw the interview was drawing to a close—heard Ishtahaba say he must join in the war-dance—Basil crept back into the woods and hurrying away, rejoined his friends.

"Boys," was his first observation, "by the great smokyzoopers! I have discovered—blundered onto the biggest, dirtiest, rascally piece of work the devil ever allotted to one of his imps to perform. In the first place, Jennie and Fanny are captives in that camp. In the second place, that dashin' dandy from the Wapsie, Jack Arp, is their abductor, and the cause of all this trouble."

"Great heavens!" exclaimed Tom Dayton: "this cannot be possible, Basil!"

"Yes, it's so—every word of it," declared Basil; "and what's more, things are comin' to a climax. Two of the young chiefs informed Ishtahaba that they were goin' to have the girls or bust a tug. This made Ish unhappy. He don't want the girls to be found in his camp—through fear the soldiers may come up and, findin' the captives there, whale the life out of his cut-throat gang. Arp wants to make Jennie think he's a hero and win her affection. By this I learned that he had not shown his hand in the abduction to the girls. But he proposed to make the girls think he was a dare-devil of a hero and rescue them, take to horse, and flee northward."

"When were they to start, Basil?" asked Fred Burch.

"Just as soon as their war-dance was at the biggest, and all attention given to it, then was the warblin' warrior from the Wapsie to gallantly rescue the captives and flee. We want him to succeed so as to get beyond reach of the two young chiefs, whose power and influence Ishtahaba fears since his right bower, Broken Face, has winked out. Oh, smokyzoopers! if it wasn't for makin' the matter all the worse for the girls, I'd give Arp and Ish's scheme away so's the two chiefs could catch Jacksie in the act of stealin' away, and then there would be fun for the million. But, boys, we want to start at once up the river and try and git in ahead of Arp and intercept him. As he'll go on horseback he'll travel faster than us, so we'd as well line out. We may miss him altogether, but it's our only chance."

Without delay the four at once set off up the river northward, moving at a lively pace.

They followed an old Indian trail which they knew led to and far beyond Snake Creek.

After traveling six or eight miles it became a party had passed them on the right and left, or were still behind. This, however, was finally settled by suddenly discovering the prairie on fire at least three miles behind them.

"That was the arrangement, boys," explained Basil, "between Ish and the valorous Arp, to fire the prairie to conceal their trail from the eyes of the rebellious young chiefs. But we'll keep on, pards, and if they don't run into our net, daylight will find us in sight of them, at least. All I want is one fair belt with old Goliath at the rusher from the 'Pinnicon, and his

labors of iniquity and love-making will have ended forever, amen! Come on, friends! My demon is out and around again, and I can't hold him back!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE BALL OPENS IN EARNEST.

NEVER were men more thoroughly astonished than were Jack Arp and his friend, Sid Bush, when their eyes fell upon their four dead horses. For a moment they stood silent, speechless—rooted to the spot, as it were. They seemed afraid to move, and scarcely dared to breathe, lest a bullet, or the knife that had slain their horses, should pierce their vitals.

The men stood in the open valley, but along Snake Creek, which was about fifty paces to their right, grew a dense fringe of wild plum and hazel brush; and that the slayers of their horses were concealed in that thicket they had not a single doubt. The work had not long been done, for blood was still running from the horrible wounds.

The situation was one of terrible suspense to the two villains who had just been congratulating themselves upon their successful escape. A dozen thoughts flashed through their brains in a very few seconds. Arp was the first to speak; in a tone that was plainly indicative of his fear, he said:

"Bush, this is the work of an enemy!"

"No doubt o' it, Jack," responded Bush.

"And," Arp continued, casting furtive glances around him as if he was afraid he would see some one, "it is the work of Ingins. A white man would have stolen—not killed these horses. Sid, I'm afraid Ishtahaba was forced into giving us away to Omasebaha and Lekonsah, and that this is their work. If so, we're goin' to get into a bad box. We'd better turn and make a break back to the girls and our guns, and get under cover of the grove if we ar'n't riddled with bullets the moment we turn—"

"Ah!" broke in Bush in sudden excitement, looking off to the southward, "what does *that* mean?"

Arp ventured to turn his eyes in the direction indicated, and saw three persons, whom he knew were white men, running in great haste toward the river. They were not over eighty rods away, and at sight of them the renegade exclaimed:

"By heavens! they're whites' followin' us! It must be that Blundering Basil and his white friends, Dayton and Burch; but—ah! by the sun and moon! They are bein' pursued by the reds! Sidney, I don't like the situation at all."

No less than a score of Indians were in pursuit of the three whites. They had suddenly appeared from behind a swell in the prairie and were pressing the fugitives hard. So rapidly were they gaining upon the three that one of the latter suddenly stopped, turned and shot down the foremost pursuer.

This seemed to encourage new strength and speed in the fugitives and the gap between them and the Indians was materially widened:

"Quite an interestin' affair, Jack, that'd be if we weren't in a pickle ourselves," declared Sid Bush. "But what can the presence of either of the parties here have to do with the cut throats o' our hosses?"

"We'll find out before this thing's over with," rejoined Arp, a little uneasy; "and we'd better get back to our rifles and the girls. It was a mistake leavin' our guns."

In the mean time, Jennie and Fanny were undergoing some surprise and excitement, also. Their pretended rescuers, on leaving them to go after the horses, were scarcely out of sight when the figure of a man appeared before them from behind a clump of trees and undergrowth.

And such a figure as it was! The girls were so terrified at sight of it that their tongues were paralyzed, and their bodies fairly benumbed. A short, stout form; a big, hatless head with hair standing on end; a face as black as an Ethiopian's in which were set a pair of large, brilliant eyes and a double row of pearly, white teeth, met their gaze.

Seeing, by the look of terror on the girl's faces, that they did not recognize him, the unknown said in a low, quick tone as he continued to advance:

"Keep quiet, girls, I'm Blundering Basil!"

The voice was familiar, and, as he came nearer, the girls recognized his features despite their mask of dirt and black ashes from the burnt plain. It was as much as the maidens could do to obey his injunction to keep quiet, but, mastering their emotions, they arose and, advancing toward the young trapper, Jennie asked in an eager voice:

"Oh, Basil! what has happened? Is Tom alive?"

"Tom's alive, Miss Jen," responded Basil, "but the worst is yet to happen. I'm goin' to shoot Jack Arp and Old Bush and let the vultures devour their carcasses!"

"Basil, you shall not!" declared Jennie. "Jack rescued us from the Indians."

"Yes, after he'd planned your capture by an infamous lie. Jennie, Tom was not hurt at all. That was Arp's scheme to decoy you from home. I heard him, with my own ears tell the chief, Ishtahaba, of his plans to rescue you, or pretend to, and make himself a hero in your eyes. Gals, they're takin' you away where they can have you in their power. But their journey's at an end. I nightily broke my back gettin' in ahead of you here in time to stop them."

"Basil is this—can it be possible?" Jennie exclaimed.

"True as holy gospel, Jennie," the youth declared; "and your brother and Fred and Charlie Burch are comin' down the creek. I left them not far away."

"Thank God!" cried Fanny, with fervent voice.

"Basil, Arp and Bush have gone out to bring in the horses. They'll soon be back," advised Jennie.

"Not with the horses, Jen," the Boy Trapper replied; "for I cut their throats to prevent the villains' escape with you, providin' I failed in rescuin' you, and prevent pursuit if I did succeed without killin' the renegades. I see the Wapsie hunter has left his rifle and accouterments here—so's Old Bush! I'll take possession o' them, I will, so let's be gittin' away from here before they get—Harkee! what does *that* mean?"

It was the report of a rifle, followed by an Indian yell.

"Great smokyzoopers!" he exclaimed, after a moment's silence; "the Ingins are on our trail! Come, gals, or all will be lost!"

Taking up the renegade's rifles and fixtures, he conducted the girls up the river a few rods, to where a jam of driftwood spanned the river. Upon this they crossed the stream, and, just as they had climbed to the top of the east bank, the bark of a pistol broke upon their ears and a bullet tore through the frowzy hair of Basil's head, almost lifting him off his feet.

Glancing across the stream they saw Jack Arp standing on the west bank, a pistol raised in the act of firing a second shot, while Old Bush had reached the bridge of driftwood and was following them across.

Leaping aside to elude Arp's bullet Basil raised Bush's own rifle and sent a bullet through the old scoundrel's brain, then, taking up his own trusty Goliath, he was about to pay his respects to Arp when that nimble-footed villain leaped behind a big tree.

Just then Basil's all attention was drawn to Tom Dayton and the Burch Brothers, who were coming up the river on the run, and Arp, discovering them, took to his heels and fled like a deer in the direction of the dead horses.

All this was quickly followed by a demoniac yell from down the river, and then like hounds upon a hot trail nearly a score of Indians burst into view in pursuit of the three young settlers.

Basil realizing the critical situation addressed the trembling, half-terrified maidens.

"Girls, break for the open valley! Cross to the top of yonder high bluff, and we'll join you there soon—go! Run, for your lives depend upon it!"

The two turned, and creeping through the fringe of bushes and undergrowth, entered the valley and started on a swift run toward the knoll indicated, a mile away.

Again turning his eyes across the river, Basil shouted to his friends:

"Here, boys! Cross on that driftwood! The gals are safe! Hump yerselves! for the Lord's sake, hump!"

It required but a few moments for the fugitives to reach Basil's side, and then all were prepared to dispute the passage of the savages across the river.

"Now, let's give the sun-burnt varlets one howlin' old welt and then scoot for the girls," suggested Basil; and raising Jack Arp's rifle, he fired at the leading red-skin. This shot was followed by the report of his friends' rifles, at which the stricken and excited savages reeled and tumbled over each other as they were halted in their mad pursuit.

There being no other crossing but the driftwood, and the whites, concealed behind trees, holding this with ready rifles, the red-skins quickly saw that it would be almost sure death to attempt to cross then, and so they scattered and sought safety in the grove.

This respite gave the men an opportunity to

reload their rifles, and for Basil to, make his friends acquainted with the situation.

Jack Arp's gun, now in the young trapper's possession, was exactly of the same make and caliber as that of his own weapon. There were no other rifles on the frontier equal to them in accuracy and range; and it was the possession of these two rifles that suggested to the boy's quick mind the plan of escape he had decided upon, and the prosecution of which had already begun.

"I sent the girls into the prairie," the young borderman explained. "With my gun and Jack Arp's in our possession no red-skin will dare crowd within forty rods of us. I know the Ingins haven't a single shooter that will hit a man over one hundred paces, and so, by takin' to the open prairie where the savages can't creep up on us or conceal themselves, I believe we can keep two-score of them at bay with our rifles and pistols."

"If I'd known you folks were so near I'd 'a' tried to save the hosses, but then, as it was, I dared take no chances, and so cut the poor dumb critters' throats. Oh, smokyzoopers! I'd like just one little shot at the bold blizzard from Wapsie before I leave here. But we mustn't stay too long and give the varlets a chance to make a flank movement on us."

For ten or fifteen minutes the four kept on the watch for the red-skins, but not the chance of a fair shot was offered, although several Indian bullets came their way, chipping the bark from the trees behind which they were concealed.

Basil amused himself by drawing the enemies' fire with Tom Dayton's cap on the end of a stick held just so the foe could see it. But after a dozen or two shots had been fired the red-skins mistrusted the trick and ceased shooting.

"They're fair to medium shots, boys," Basil observed, "at short range. But it's time now for us to shin out. The girls have got a good start, and'll get to the knoll, or bluff, by the time we do. Drop to your knees and crawl through the brush to the open plain."

Taking the lead, Basil started on the retreat, and soon the four had reached the open valley unobserved. Then rising to their feet, they dashed away at a lively run after the girls. But they had gone but a short distance when they made a discovery that almost chilled the blood in their veins.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE RETREAT BEGINS.

THE point to which Basil had directed the girls was a spur of the uplands, impinging sharply upon the river-bottom, and when the four whites came in sight of the maidens, the latter had just begun to ascend the long, sloping prominence. They were nearly a mile away, while off toward the southeast, fully as far from the boys, and not over half that distance from the girls, three Indians were discovered running like deer to intercept the maidens.

"My heavens!" exclaimed Fred Burch, "if they reach the girls ahead of us all will be lost!"

"But they must not be permitted to do so," declared Basil; so, boys, it'll be another race for life. They've the start two to one, but if the girls reach the bluff and see the red-skins, they can help us by comin' back. Come, boys, no talk—save wind, and plank it down like deer!"

The race was on in an instant. Heavy and stout as Basil was, he held close to the trim-built and fleet-footed Tom Dayton. In fact, it was a neck-and-neck, so to speak, between the four. Cumbered as they were with their guns, and other weapons and supplies, they flew over the ground with remarkable swiftness.

Reaching the summit of the bluff, almost out of breath, Jennie and Fanny gazed behind and around them. Quickly they discovered their new danger, and without a moment's hesitation they started off down the hill—not toward their friends, but northward.

Soon they were out of sight of both friends and foes, but every moment the former expected them to appear in view again around the hill.

The red-skins, naturally supposing the maidens had started toward their friends, made a bold dash to cut them off. They passed between the whites and the base of the bluff, and not seeing the girls yet, they continued on and disappeared around the north side of the hill.

At a loss to understand what had become of the girls, the young borderers ran on to the bluff and ascended to its summit. From there they had a fine view of their surroundings, and it was with a feeling of great joy they discovered Jennie and her companion on the slope south of them, they having passed around the point by the east side—a clever trick, whether intend-

ed or not, for it threw the Indians off their track and brought their friends between them and danger.

The Indians, however, were not in sight of the boys when the girls were discovered, and running along to the east side of the hill, they suddenly came face to face with the savages who were trailing the fugitives around the bluff through the grass.

The red-skins were taken wholly by surprise. They had never dreamed of encountering the pale-faces there, and so soon. They turned to flee. Four rifles rung out as one and the red fugitives plunged wildly down the steep hillside, their earthly career ended.

A few moments later Jennie and Fannie were with their friends, almost prostrated with the excitement and fear through which they had passed. But Fred Burch and Tom spoke words of cheer and encouragement to them, and soon much of their wonted spirit and strength had revived.

By this time the red-skins left beyond the river had crossed over and were coming across the valley in pursuit. There were sixteen, all told, of the party, and, foremost of all the young bordermen recognized the erect figure of Jack Arp. They were coming like a whirlwind, but instead of their presence filling Blundering Basil's heart with fear, he appropriated Fred Burch's hat and defiantly tossing it into the air, shouted aloud to them in tones they must have heard with a feeling of savage rage.

"Boy, you'll burst your lungs" Fred Burch declared.

"It had to come out, Fred," Basil replied with a grim smile, "but that had nothin' to do with my fightin' and runnin' wind. I'm ready for either any moment."

"Well," replied Charlie Burch in downright earnestness; "this running from Ingins and prairie-fires, and pursuing girl-thieves are crowding onto Tom and me pretty fast, and if it keeps on a month or two longer will vote our holiday with Blundering Basil a blistering old fraud."

"It's good exercise, Charles," replied Basil, with a smile; "it develops speed, muscle, endurance, as well as a variety of novel incidents. You know I promised you boys a 'way-up' time, and between Jacksie Arp and them odorous red-skins, you'll git it. But, folks, we must be moving at once. We must keep in the open, level prairie so that them varlets can't get onto us unseen. By varyin' our course a little we can have thirty miles of dead level prairie, with water to be had 'bout half-way."

"But what if the red-skins should fire the prairie?" asked Tom, who had a vivid recollection of his and Charlie's adventure a night or two before.

"Let 'm fire away. There's no wind to speak of to make it dangerous, and even if there was, we could easily back-fire, and they'd have their trouble for their pains. What we want is to keep ahead of them. So long as they're behind we can keep 'm in check. They're not goin' to dash up on us even if they are four to one, for we could play on them with rifles and revolvers from the moment they came in range o' Goliah till the last one fell. No, they will not be apt to charge on us in open day. An Ingin, I am told, hardly ever does that caper, though Jack Arp might persuade them to try it. I hope he will, and that he'll take the lead. I want to down him with his own gun. But, friends, time's up; forward—march!"

So saying, he led the retreat into the great, treeless expanse stretching away toward the east. At first the way was somewhat hilly and undulating, but in less than two miles' travel they reached an almost dead level.

"Take it easy, folks," Basil had occasion to observe when he saw his friends were inclined to quicken their footsteps. "Take it easy; haste makes waste! It'll not lessen our danger a bit by hurryin'. They're bound to come just so close, and then it's our duty to see that they come no closer. With my gun and Arp's on guard, two hundred yards is just my distance. The Wapsie love-maker knows the power of his rifle, and they will not be apt to crowd on its muzzle. As to the pop-guns them Ingins have, there need be no fear only in close quarters, and that they can't get 'less they git in ahead and round us. So take a natural gait and save your strength for extra occasions, if any are forced upon us."

Basil's advice was received with approbation and acted upon. His plans of retreat and defense were also concurred in by the boys, although they knew it would require great vigilance, nerve, and endurance to carry them to a successful issue.

The pursuers finally appeared in sight about two miles behind. Basil motioned them to hurry on; but they needed no urging, for they were coming at a speed that, in less than an hour, carried them to within fifty rods of the fugitives. Then they slackened their pace, to all appearances pretty well winded.

Again Basil motioned them on; but the wily red-man was in no hurry. He had already defined the tactics of the whites and proposed to bide his time.

And thus with both pursuers and pursued in plain view—almost hailing distance of each other, red-skin's subtle cunning was pitted against white man's skill and tact.

The first move of the foe was to scatter out and then move forward at a run, yelling like demons. It was evident that this movement was made to test the courage of the fugitives, as well as their prudence in the use of their rifles.

But not a bit faster did Basil permit one of his friends to move. He cautioned the boys to be calm, and steady their nerves that they might use their rifles with their wonted skill. The extra rifle—that of old Bush—was given to Jennie to carry and have in readiness in case it were needed.

Basil kept a close watch upon the approaching foe. He was well versed in prairie craft, and noted for the accuracy with which he could measure with the eye distances on the plain. In fact, it was this gift that made him a successful deer-hunter, and now it was to stand him well in hand, as an Indian-fighter.

The red-skins, however, mistrusted his purpose and, when the young trapper suddenly turned and threw his rifle to his shoulder, every one of them, including Arp, threw himself flat upon the ground in the grass.

A mocking laugh burst from Basil's lips. The dead verdure was too short to hide more than half their bodies.

"The fools!" the boy exclaimed, "I see enough to aim at, and I'll shoot a little low and try the advantages of a glancing shot."

He did so: and his friends saw a cloud of dirt puff up a few inches short of the target.

"A little low, Bass," said Tom Dayton.

"I don't know 'bout that," replied the young trapper; "I see the red-skin doin' a little squirmin' as if he'd a pain. I guess he got his medicine on the glance. It's a lovely distance for that kind of a shot—here, Charlie, let me have Arp's gun and I'll try another while you reload mine."

The young trapper endeavored to locate Arp's form, but as he could not do so with certainty, he fired at the one he thought the closest; and this time there was no doubt as to the result. The red-skin bounded three feet into the air with a frightful yell and fell back motionless in the grass.

This was more than the savages could stand. They sprung to their feet with a yell of dismay and fired a volley at the whites. Every shot fell thirty yards short. Basil burst into a derisive laugh, then quickly said to his friends:

"Look sharp, boys! they're coming!"

But to the utter surprise of all, the foe began retreating, Jack Arp well in the lead.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Basil, "they're fallin' back by the great smokyzoopers! But let 'm fall; they know our range, now, so let 'm beware. Oh! blessed Goliah!"—patting his gun—"of you, and your twin brother, so long in bad company, I shall ever sing! But, friends, about face! Forward, march!"

CHAPTER XVII.

BASIL GOES DOWN.

LEISURELY the retreat was continued over the prairie, the Indians following at a like pace, and at a distance calculated to insure safety against Basil's rifles which had ended the career of two of their warriors.

It was something almost unparalleled in Indian warfare, four fugitive boys dictating the speed at which their enemies might pursue, and daring them, as the impulsive Basil frequently did, by sign and even word of mouth, to approach nearer.

It was the general opinion of the borderers that Jack Arp had little to do or say in the movements of the red-skins. He was 'most always by himself, and generally in the rear. Frequently some of the red-skins seemed to hold a consultation, but Jack was very seldom in the council. His influence was waning.

The renegade carried a rifle—no doubt a dead savage's—but he seemed to have little faith in its shooting qualities, for he had fired it but once. It was well, however, for the fugitives, that they were in possession of his gun, for Arp

was a fine shot, and things would not have been so one-sided.

Every possible contingency likely to arise was discussed pro and con by the bordermen. They had no fears of an open charge by the foe now, nor was there anything to fear so long as they could keep the enemy all in sight, and the way before them clear.

The day was quite a pleasant one so far as weather was concerned. A soft breeze drifted up from the south fanning the brown grass into a gentle tremor, and kissing the flushed and perspiring faces of the fugitives. Ever and anon, a wedge-shaped flock of wild-geese or brants forged southward through the hazy upper deep giving voice to their peculiar "hooks" and splintered "yil-lips." And now and then a coyote could be seen loping off across the dreamy plain, or loitering in the rear, half in fear, half-expectant.

The sun, a blood-red disk in the smoky sky, had almost reached the zenith when a dark object appeared in sight on the plain some miles before the fugitives. Blundering Basil informed his friends that it was the top of a little grove, or rather a wild plum thicket, which grew near the head of a creek running away across the plain toward the south; and the news was quite encouraging, for nearly all were beginning to taste the bitterness of thirst.

Straight toward the little oasis, as it were, the fugitives bent their course; and at once their pursuers seemed to define their purpose, and began maneuvering to cut them off from the grove.

Two nimble-footed warriors left the main party and started off on a trot with the evident purpose of swinging around to the right and reaching the grove ahead of the fugitives.

Admonishing his friends to be careful, and gradually increase their pace for awhile, at least, Blundering Basil left them and swung off to intercept the two warriors, or force them to take a wider circle.

Seeing the fearless young borderman had the advantage of a short cut, the savages made a dash forward, yelling like devils, in hopes of forcing him to give up his attempt and fall back to his friends; but their feint proved a costly one, and that there were others besides Blundering Basil among the fugitives who could handle a gun.

With Arp's rifle, Tom Dayton, had brought his skill as a deer-hunter and marksman into requisition, and sent a bullet through a red-skin's shoulder.

The unlooked-for mishap checked the advance and caused a momentary delay to inquire into the extent of their friend's injury. Jack Arp made himself useful now in dressing the red-skin's wound, which self-imposed duty threw him some ways behind his red allies; but he soon caught up, leaving the disabled warrior creeping slowly along after him.

In the mean time, Basil had kept abreast of the two warriors who refused, much to his surprise, to swerve from the course they had started out upon. The result was that every step brought them a little closer to each other and, finally, the Indians concluded they were close enough for safety, and stopping short both raised their rifles and fired at him. One bullet fell short, but the other whistled so close to his ear that he involuntarily dodged, seeing which the savages uttered a derisive laugh and ran on reloading their guns as they went.

Finally they stopped for a second shot at the hated enemy; but it was Basil's time now, and he quickly improved it. Both Indians jumped aside when his gun flashed to dodge the bullet, but one of them made a second and extra high jump, grasped his left foot in one hand and spun around on his right heel like a top, while yell after yell of pain and dismay issued from his lips. He had been shot through the foot.

"Hurrah!" shouted Fred Burch, "another Ingin ready for the ambulance!"

"Yes, and there goes the ambulance," added Tom Dayton with grim humor, pointing to a coyote loping across the prairie.

"Oh, dear! dear!" exclaimed Jennie, unable to restrain her emotions longer, "will this dreadful retreat ever, ever end?"

"Don't get discouraged now, sister," her brother said; "I'm sure we're having the best of it so far, thanks to our superior, long-ranged rifles, and the skillful generalship of that wild, impulsive, and indomitable Blundering Basil."

"But I'm thinking, Tom, that our success is going to make Basil too venturesome, and lose us all," Jennie responded. "See, he is now further from us than those Indians behind—Oh, look! the Indian is goin' to shoot at him again—"

The maiden's words ended in a terrified scream, for, as the Indian's gun rung out, Basil was seen to throw up his hands, stagger forward and fall to the earth!

"My God, Jennie! your words have already come true!" cried Tom. "*Blundering Basil has been killed!*"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TIGER TURNS ON THE HUNTERS.

ENCOURAGED by the fall of the dreaded young trapper, the savages uttered a frightful war-whoop and started toward the three settlers as if determined now to put an end to the work before them.

At the same time the warrior who had brought Basil down uttered a yell of triumph, whipped out his knife and made a break for the scalp of his victim.

The situation had now become extremely critical for the fugitives, but with Spartan courage they prepared to meet the worst.

"Boys," said Fred Burch, "it's now or never, life or death! Hold your fire till sure of your man, then drop your rifles and let your revolvers do the rest!"

The three had turned facing the foe, but continued their retreat walking backward, their rifles held at a trail. The savages finally began running in a zigzag course so as to prevent the whites taking a deliberate aim; but this did not disconcert the bordermen in the least, and they maintained their ground with steady nerve.

But, suddenly—before the foe were within thirty rods of them—the bordermen heard a shot and death-yell behind them, followed by a wild shout of triumph. A quick glance over their shoulders told them all; they saw Blundering Basil coming rapidly toward them, while the savage who had sought his scalp lay dead on the prairie.

A cry of joy burst from Jennie and Fanny's lips, that found an echo in the hearts of the three young bordermen.

To the savages, however, it was a terrible surprise to see the dreaded foe on his feet, unharmed, and their friend down. In fact, it proved as effective as a volley of rifle-shots in checking their advance, for, with a half wolfish cry of dismay, they stopped, flung themselves upon the earth and opened a wild fire on the fugitives.

Tom Dayton and the Burches turned and hastened on until they met Basil, whose blackened face was streaming with perspiration.

"Bass, you frowsy-headed scamp!" exclaimed Tom, "what did you do that for?"

"To fool that Ingin," was the reply. "I discovered that the smarty had a pretty good gun, and knowed how to use it, and I wanted to take him before he hit somebody. I was afraid, however, my trick might precipitate them other varmints onto you; but, it's all right now, isn't it, Jennie?"

"Well, I hope so," responded Jennie; "but, you gave us an awful scare and must not do so again unless you tell us beforehand or cannot help it."

The Indian wounded in the foot was limping away to the rear of his friends, and in the course of time, he and the warrior shot in the shoulder were straggling along together, with half a dozen patient coyotes following behind.

Securing the dead Indian's weapons, Basil again led the way toward the plum thicket, the foe making no further attempt to prevent them reaching it, but were content to remain at a respectable distance behind.

In an hour more the fugitives halted about fifty yards from the thicket, when Basil said to Jennie and Fanny:

"Gals, take Fred's hat, go to the spring and get you a drink and bring us one in the hat. You'll find the spring a little ways south of the thicket in the holler."

The maidens took the hat and departed. The Indians made a feint as if to charge, but it was hailed by a jeering laugh from Basil, who finally shouted to Jack Arp, the wind being in his favor:

"Say, Jack Arp! come over here and tell us how you feel—how you and Ishtababa arranged the rescue of the gals—how you plotted against the young chiefs. Come over and tell Miss Jennie of your love and dyin' affection. She thinks you the boss hero and rescuer from 'way over yan. Come along, all of you! Don't be afraid of us. We're all young, tender boys, but Fred here, and he's no ancient bull-moose."

If his words were heard, they failed to produce the least effect upon the enemy. They seemed determined not to be provoked into any act that would cost them more lives, but quietly bided their time.

The stay of the girls was quite prolonged, but when they returned they not only brought a hatful of cool water for the rescuers, but Fanny also brought an apron filled with wild-grapes and black haws, which helped out their meager supply of food in making a very satisfactory dinner.

Finally the girls were dispatched for a second hatful of water. They had made but half the distance to the spring, when they were seen to turn and come hurrying back to their friends in apparent excitement.

"Now, what's wrong?" asked Tom.

"It may be some more Ingins comin' to the help of their varlets," answered Basil; "and, if so, our goose'll be cooked—What's the matter, girls?"

"A white man," replied Jennie, nearly out of breath, "is coming up the hollow toward the spring. He's on one horse, leading another, with a big load on its back!"

"Sure it's a white man?" queried Tom.

"Yes, brother, I am very sure."

"I'll go out and see 'bout it," said Basil, and he advanced toward the spring.

The young trapper soon came in sight of the horseman, who was riding slowly up the valley. At the very first glimpse of him, Basil recognized him as Old Natty Thorndyke, the hunter who had taken part in the contest at Hickory Point. Motioning to the old man to come up, Basil returned to his friends with the news of his discovery.

Soon the old man rode into view of the fugitives and the Indians, and drawing rein he gazed in perplexity at the two parties. Basil yelled to him to come up.

Throwing his rifle into position before him, the old man cautiously approached. As soon as he recognized the whites, his fears vanished, and slipping from his saddle, he advanced on foot to the fugitives.

"By jingoes!" he exclaimed, as he came up. "I wouldn't been more s'prised to meet a herd o' elephants here! What does this all mean, anyhow?"

After shaking hands with all, the old hunter heard, from Basil's lips, the story of Arp's villainy, the girl's abduction, the death of Uncle Phil, and their retreat across the prairie.

"And you say Arp's out yander with 'em Ingins?" old Natty observed, his gray eyes snapping; "right out yander?"

"Yes."

"Boys, I war on my way to a new trappin' ground north, but I'd as lief die here as anywhere," the old hunter said, "so let's go to work and larrup darnation outen them critters! The tiger's been hunted long enough, now let the animile hunt the hunters. I'm hankerin' arter an Ingin fight—haven't had one for many long days."

The red-skins, in the mean time, were holding a consultation, in which Jack Arp seemed to have something to say. But it finally broke up when they discovered the young borderers, now reinforced by Thorndyke, boldly advancing upon them. They scattered right and left, making a pretense of giving battle, but the whites quickly saw that their object was to swing around on either side and get in between them and the grove.

"Let's waste a few shots, boys, on a venture," suggested old Natty, raising the hammer of his long-barreled Kentucky rifle.

This was no sooner said than done. The old man, Basil, and Tom Dayton began popping away at the nearest of the red-skins, with the result of two wounded the first discharge.

To reload was the work of but a minute, and then Basil and old Natty resolved to pay their respects to Jack Arp, although they had little hopes of reaching him. They both fired as one, and if both bullets had crashed through his brain he would not have dropped quicker, nor, to all appearance, more lifeless. But his death, if dead he was, did not seem to excite the savages one way or another—to fear or rage. They held their ground fairly well, and returned the fire with vigor. By charging their guns with more powder, they succeeded in throwing bullets even beyond the whites. Blundering Basil seemed to be the one who drew most of their attention, and bullets whistled around him and cut the dirt before and on either side of him in a most dangerous manner.

"Basil," said Natty Thorndyke, "they seem determined to wing you, at any rate."

Scarcely had the old man spoken when Basil was seen to whirl half-round and drop his rifle. Then he staggered forward; dropped to his knees, and with a groan rolled over on his side.

"They've downed him! curse 'em, they've

downed Basil!" cried Old Natty, his eyes fairly blazing with rage.

A yell burst from the red-skin's lips, and the whites at once prepared to meet a charge; but, to the surprise of the latter, the savages gathered up their killed and wounded, and started in full retreat from the field, seeming to be fully satisfied with their experience of the day.

When old Natty and the three young settlers turned to where Basil had fallen, they were happily surprised to see him on his knees trying to regain his feet. Blood was running down his face and from his left sleeve and dropping from the ends of his fingers.

"Boy, they hit ye, didn't they?" observed Thorndyke.

"Yes, all over," replied Basil, with evident pain.

"Basil, are you badly hurt?" eagerly inquired Tom Dayton, who had overlooked a slight flesh wound he himself had received in his anxiety for his young friend.

"Tom, they have shot me to death!" was the startling reply, of the gallant trapper boy.

"No, Basil, not that bad! God forbid!" cried Tom.

Old Natty had the wounded boy carried to the spring and then he examined his wounds. He found that he had been shot in four different places. Two of the wounds were mere scratches, but the others were serious. One of them was in the shoulder the other in the thigh, the femoral artery being severed!

Possessed of a borderman's rude knowledge of surgery the old hunter employed it now in binding up Basil's wound. He endeavored to be cheerful while thus engaged, and this, taken in connection with the boy's wonderful fortitude and occasional humorous remark, led the young settlers to think their heroic friend was not as badly hurt as was at first supposed.

After Thorndyke had finished his work, he went down to a pool below the spring to wash the blood from his hands. Tom Dayton followed him.

"Natty," the young man said, "do you think Basil is seriously hurt?"

"Seriously hurt?" exclaimed the old man in a half-choked voice, mist in his eyes; "why, boy, Blundering Basil will never live to see yonder sun go down!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE END.

DEAR reader, we almost regret that this is not wholly a romance—that Blundering Basil is not a mere creation of the fancy, instead of a real character whose eccentricities, deeds of heroism and undaunted courage, go to make up a thrilling chapter in the unwritten history of the great wild West. In that case we could have written differently, and the *denouement* of our story been more pleasant; but, sad and sorrowful as it is, the truth must be told. As Old Natty Thorndyke had predicted, before the sun of that eventful day went down, the spirit of Blundering Basil passed out of its pain-racked tenement, and embarked on that mystic river of Life that flows eternal by the throne of God.

This pen is inadequate to describe the youth's last moments there in that great solitude, surrounded by weeping, heart-broken friends. Suffice it to say that he died as he had lived—a brave, generous and heroic boy, whose virtues to this day are extolled by those who knew him, and whose deeds of daring will live in memory and history as long as heroism and courage are worthy of emulation.

To Jennie Dayton the blow fell the heaviest. Few, if any, knew that within her young breast there was a cherished affection for the trapper-boy that will last until her heart has ceased to beat.

The young trapper was buried where he died, and his grave carefully concealed, until such a time as the remains could be removed to the settlement and interred in the cemetery with Christian rites.

After the death of Jack Arp the Indians took their wounded and beat a hasty retreat westward; and, right here we will say, that the young settlers received no further trouble from the minions of Ishtababa. In fact, as soon as the latter saw the difficulty into which he was likely to get himself, by permitting Jack Arp to use him and his warriors as mere tools, he broke camp on the Des Moines and never stopped until he had passed far beyond the Missouri.

Old Natty Thorndyke cached his trapping outfit, placed Jennie and Fanny upon his horses and accompanied the young settlers back to Hickory Point. And thus ended Tom and Charlie's holiday on the prairie—an experience they never had any desire to repeat.

THE END

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